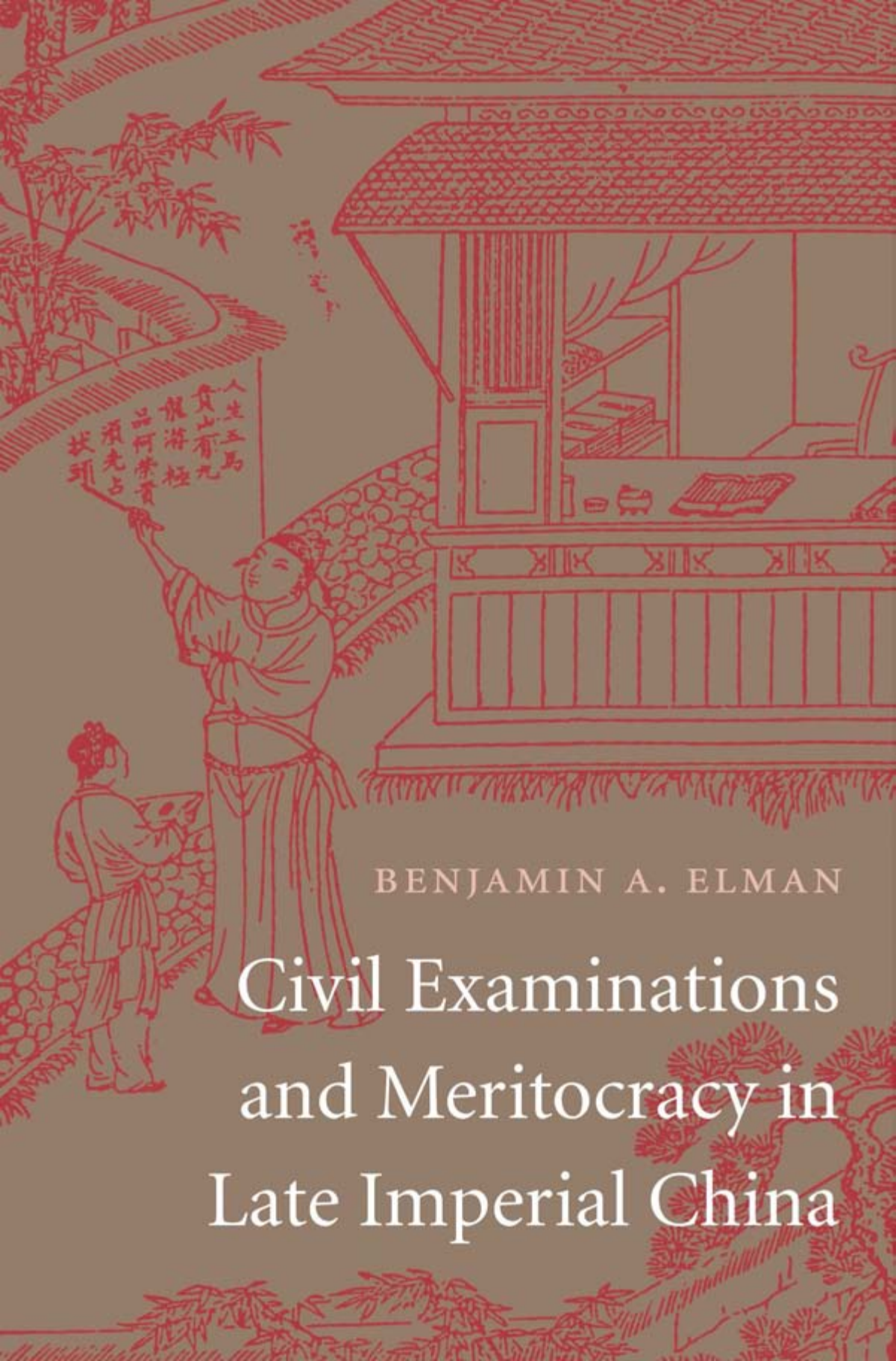




BENJAMIN A. ELMAN

Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China

CIVIL EXAMINATIONS AND
MERITOCRACY IN LATE
IMPERIAL CHINA

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BENJAMIN A. ELMAN

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In memory of Philip Rieff, who taught me how to think through
an issue without assent, and for Sarah.

Thanks also to fellow travelers along the late imperial
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Conventions

FOR THE DATES of Chinese Dynasties and the listing of Ming and Qing Emperors, see the Appendixes, which are followed by Abbreviations.

The Chinese usually added one additional year of age during the first year, if a child was born just before the lunar new year. To reflect this double counting during the first year, I have used the Chinese term of *sui* for “years” in this volume.

The term *literati* refers to select members of the landholding gentry who maintained their status as cultural elites primarily through classical scholarship, knowledge of lineage ritual, and literary publications. The term *gentry* refers to those before 1900 who wielded local power as landlords or provincial and empire-wide power as government officials. The cultural status of both the gentry at large and the literati in their midst correlated with their rank on the civil service examinations. In addition, during the late empire, gentry and merchants intermingled. The latter freely transferred their financial resources into classical educations for their sons to become part of the gentry elite.

The term “Way learning” (*Daoxue*) will refer to the schools of literati thought that developed in the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties. There has been a trend to use “Neo-Confucianism” (*xin ruxue*) to cover all classical intellectual currents from the Tang dynasty (618–906) until the fall of the last, Qing, dynasty in 1911. Readers should guard against this tendency to assimilate Neo-Confucianism to the broader amorphous designations that have been attached to it. The definition and content of “Way learning” were as debatable during the eleventh and twelfth centuries as they were in the seventeenth and eighteenth. The term *Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy* will refer specifically to the imperially sanctioned Cheng

Yi (1033–1107) and Zhu Xi (1130–1200) school of “Way learning” interpretations for the official canon of the Five Classics, Four Books, and Dynastic Histories. These views officially dominated in civil examinations beginning in 1313 and remained the basis of the imperial examinations until 1905. “Way learning” began, however, as more mainstream Song dynasty classicism during the twelfth century, before it attained its ideological scope as the official curriculum for civil examinations during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties.

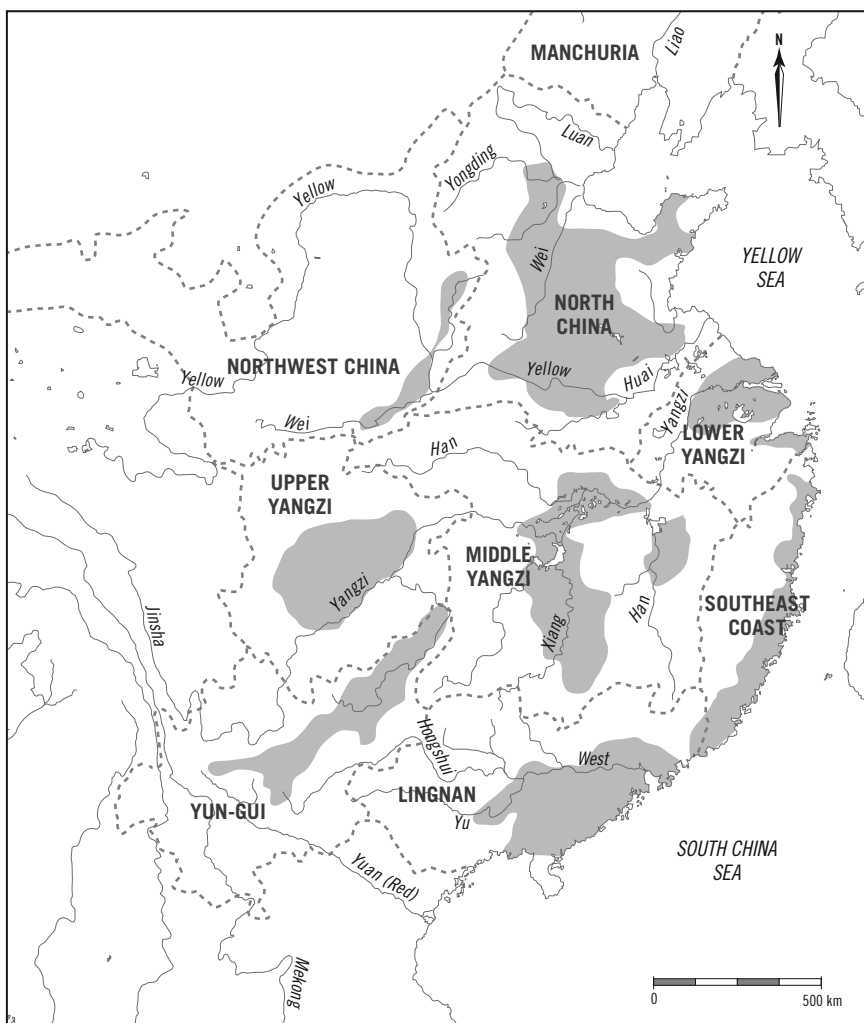
Although I will stress civil examinations, we should not overlook the place of military examinations as a parallel track in Chinese imperial governance. I will discuss some aspects of these parallel tracks in Chapters 3 and 6, but more focused research on the military examinations since Song times is still needed. A beginning toward that better understanding is Winston Lo, “A New Perspective on the Sung Civil Service,” *Journal of Asian History* 17 (1983): 121–135. Sam Gilbert reevaluates the significance of the Qing military examinations in his “Mengzi’s Art of War: The Kangxi Emperor Reforms the Qing Military Examinations,” in *Military Culture in Imperial China*, ed. Nicola Di Cosmo (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 243–256. Compare with Alastair Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 40–49. See also Joanna Waley-Cohen, *The Culture of War in China: Empire and the Military under the Qing Dynasty* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), and Ralph Sawyer, trans., *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993). Although my account emphasizes the role of classical thought in the civil branch of Ming-Qing government, the reader should keep in mind unresolved problems with notions of the civil service that follow long-standing civilian conceits and thereby slight the military service in such a definition.

The most frequently used primary and secondary sources are cited in the endnotes using abbreviations, which are listed just before the endnotes. Otherwise, the first time a work is referenced in a chapter in the endnotes, it is cited in full; thereafter in the chapter it is cited in shortened form. For a bibliography and Chinese characters, see Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*

(CHCELIC). For Chinese historical figures, see biographical collections such as *Dictionary of Ming Biography* (DMB), *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period* (ECCP), and Howard Boorman and Richard Howard, *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China*, 5 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967–1971).



Map 1. Administrative map of late imperial China.



Map 2. Physiocratic macroregions of agrarian China in relation to major rivers.

Introduction

THIS VOLUME INTEGRATES the history of late imperial China with its history of classical education and civil examinations. It stresses the role education played in Chinese society and the significance of the civil service in approximating the world's first political meritocracy in political, social, and intellectual life. The history of traditional education and imperial civil examinations before the rise of the Chinese "Republic" provides us with a prism of analysis to delineate the complex relation between classical ideals of individual merit and historical processes of education, learning, and socialization from 1400 to 1900.

Probing beneath the educational ideals enunciated by classical teachers, we see how education was theorized and practiced for half a millennium under the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. In the absence of public schools for elementary education, how was education affected by social and kinship relations and gender? What was the content and perceived function of elementary education for the society and state at large? How did the civil examinations represent classical ideals? How did the doubling of the size of the late empire under Manchu rule influence the extension of education and schooling in a multiethnic political culture?

The Song dynasty (960–1280) in particular inspired new educational ideals for the late empire, 1400–1900. Placed in their later social and political contexts, we see why Chinese, regardless of class or gender, and both Mongol and Manchu rulers valorized a moral education that stressed the Learning of the "Way" (*Daoxue*, lit., "Way learning"; called

“Neo-Confucianism” starting in the twentieth century).¹ Because its content and meaning varied widely, education meant different things to different constituencies. The late imperial government represented an asymmetrical overlap of interests among the ruling house, state bureaucracy, and elite literati families. Ming and Qing dynasty elites dominated local society; their local obligations for family, kin, and home community increasingly involved them in delivering some social and educational services to commoners and women.²

These aspects of daily practice are overlooked in recent studies of imperial China, which tend either to (1) dismiss premodern Chinese education as a dismal exercise in rote learning or (2) sentimentalize the “unfolding” of the Song dynasty’s own classical ideals called “Way learning” as the primary literati voice for Chinese intellectual history. While the first view has thankfully peaked, the second still retains intensity. Modern-day champions of Song-Ming-Qing “Neo-Confucianism” overstate the role of “Way learning” in the post-Song historical record of political activism, social voluntarism, and local dissent. In a sea of 150–300 million imperial subjects, Ming-Qing Confucian literati never outnumbered the pious adepts of Chinese religion, Buddhism, or Daoism; vast numbers of each mind-set accommodated the imperial system to the greater society that supported it. There were no social revolutions before the Taipings (1850–1864) and no political revolutions before the 1911 Republic. A perennial social gulf between peasant-farmers and scholar-officials abided.

Negative accounts of the civil service have emphasized the era after 1865. Pervaded teleologically with modern assumptions about the failure of the late imperial state, such accounts of the classical content and literary form of the examinations are too brief and exceptional. Moreover, the animosities of early twentieth-century Chinese radicals toward the classical selection system have colored interpretations of the system. These were driven by historical agendas during the 1919 “May Fourth Period” of revolutionary ferment, which we no longer share.³

In the eight chapters that follow, I present the civil examination process and state curriculum primarily during the Ming and Qing dynasties, 1400–1900, in three parts: (1) the doubly triumphant and tragic construction of “Way learning” first as mainstream classicism at the end

of the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1280) and afterwards as political orthodoxy during the early Ming, 1370–1425, at the expense of its political victims; (2) the unintended and positive consequences after 1450 of an empire of well-trained civil examination “failures”; and (3) the retooling of civil examinations to accord with changing times.

The first two chapters delineate how by 1500, Ming China, after a violent beginning, created a political merit system in which social prestige and official appointment depended for the most part on written examinations for educational credentials. Trials by examination corroborated elite political status and social prerogatives, which in turn produced new literati social groups that endured from 1400 to the early twentieth century. Song “Confucian learning” (*ruxue*, lit., “scholarly learning”) became the empire-wide examination curriculum reaching into 1,350 counties and tens of thousands of villages.

Tang-Song emphasis on rhymed prose and poetry was abruptly ended in the first Ming provincial and metropolitan examinations of 1370 and 1371, for example. The new curriculum still required classical essays on the Four Books and Five Classics. The complete removal of poetry from the civil examinations lasted from 1370 to 1756, when the examination curriculum pendulum swung decisively back to balance the essay with a poetry question again. But examination policy never hindered the popularity of poetry and literary flair among literati groups, which demonstrates the cultural limits of the classical curriculum in influencing intellectual life.⁴

Chapter 2 completes Part I by demarcating how the civil service competition created a curriculum that consolidated gentry, military, and merchant families into a culturally defined status group of degree-holders who shared (1) a common classical language, (2) memorization of a shared canon, and (3) a literary style of writing known as the 8-legged essay. Examinations defined literary culture, but the curriculum also mirrored literati opinion on imperial interests. Moral cultivation was a perennial concern of the imperial court. It sought to ensure that the officials chosen in the examination market would loyally serve the ruling family. Classical literacy, the mastery of “Way learning,” and writing terse but elegant examination essays publicly marked educated literati as a culturally defined status group of degree-holders.

Chapter 2 also presents the interpretive community, canonical standards, and institutional control of formal knowledge, which became key features of the examination system and its testing halls empire-wide. Examiners and candidates shared an explicit logic for formulating questions and answers and an implicit logic for building semantic and thematic categories of learning. These enabled them to mark and divide their cognitive world according to the moral attitudes, social dispositions, and political compulsions of their day. Examiners also served as officials and agents of literati knowledge. Their judgments became the licensing norms of the late empire, which controlled, in theory, access to important political appointments.

This institutional effort to develop classical consensus and political efficacy accomplished the goals for which it was designed. Examinations also accomplished significant goals for which they were not designed. In Part II, we see how a classical education restructured the complex relations between social status, political power, and cultural prestige—just as humanism and a classical education served elites in the kingdoms and nation-states of early-modern Europe. Part II also shows why civil examinations alone were not a direct avenue for social mobility (i.e., they did not provide an opportunity for the vast majority of peasants and artisans to move into elite circles). Making up 90 percent of the population, peasants, traders, and artisans were not even a noteworthy part of the 2–3 million who regularly failed local biennial tests. Commoners and merchants eventually lifted their status by accumulating wealth and educational resources, however. Over several generations, their sons and grandsons qualified for local licensing examinations (*shengyuan*) and obtained special legal and tax benefits that accrued with such status.

The limited social circulation into the government of lesser elites from gentry, military, and merchant backgrounds was an unexpected by-product of the selection process. In addition, the enormous pool of examination failures created a reasonably well-to-do collection of literary talent that flowed easily into ancillary roles. We must look beyond the official meritocracy to see the ironically larger “success story” of the millions of failures in the civil examinations. One of the unintended consequences of the civil examinations was the creation of legions of classically literate men (and women), who used their linguistic talents for

a variety of nonofficial purposes, from physicians to pettifoggers, ritual specialists, and lineage agents; from fiction writers, playwrights, printers, and bookmen to examination essay teachers; from girls, maids, and courtesans competing for spouses and patrons to mothers educating their sons.

Chapter 3 describes a healthy circulation of Chinese elites via a classical education based on nontechnical moral and statecraft theory. The Ming civil service successfully selected from among its elites a small group of officials to serve the imperial court at its highest echelons of power. By 1450, several centuries before Europe did so, the Ming state committed itself financially to support a single school in every county, which was modeled on Song dynasty precedent.⁵

Chapters 3 and 4 together show how, despite the unexpected fall of the Ming in 1644, the succeeding Qing dynasty immediately reconstituted civil examinations. As in the Ming, Qing examinations were regularly held in 140 prefectures and about 1,350 counties. Medieval examinations had been held only in the capital, while from 1000 to 1350 regular examinations, when held, occurred only in the provincial and imperial capitals. Learning from the Mongol failure to maintain power over the Chinese, Manchu emperors favored civil examinations to cope with ruling an empire of extraordinary economic strength undergoing unprecedented demographic change. Qing emperors put in place empire-wide examinations that occupied a central educational position in Chinese government and society until the examinations were abolished in 1905.

Chapter 4 reveals that despite their initial success, dynastic schools, one per county, were eventually absorbed into the examination system and remained schools in name only. Because the classical curriculum was routinized, little teaching took place in them. Dynastic schools became way stations, that is, “testing enters,” for students preparing for the more prestigious civil service examinations. Imagine if American students seeking to enter medical school only had to pass the Medical Boards prepared by the Princeton Educational Testing Service and were not required to attend college. Song and later Ming-Qing schools of classical learning were trumped by the civil examinations. Government schools in effect became “waiting stations” for those who had not passed the civil examinations.

The private domains of lineages, families, and temples took over training young men in vernacular and classical literacy. Dynastic schools in China never entertained goals of mass education. Designed to recruit talent into the “ladder of success,” a classical education became the *sine qua non* for social and political prestige empire-wide in local affairs. Imperial rulers recognized an education based on the Classics as an essential task of government, and Chinese elites perceived a classical education as the correct measure of their moral and social worth.

Chapter 4 also shows that Ming education was already premised on outdated social distinctions between literati, peasants, artisans, and merchants in descending order of rank and prestige. Under the Ming, sons of merchants for the first time were legally permitted to take the civil examinations. Occupational prohibitions, which extended from so-called mean peoples (those engaged in “unclean” occupations) to all Daoist and Buddhist clergy, however, kept many others out of the civil service competition, not to mention an unstated gender bias against all women.

Chapter 5 completes Part II by interspersing the examination marketplace and elite and public cultural history. Literati regularly turned to local religion and the mantic arts in their efforts to understand and rationalize their emotional responses to the competitive local, provincial, and metropolitan examinations, which increasingly resembled “cultural prisons” they could not escape from. By comparing literati writings, popular accounts in novels and stories, and folklore traditions associated with the personal trials and tribulations of the examinees and examiners, we understand more clearly why the civil examinations were central events in China’s cultural history.

Chapter 5 also explores late imperial examination dreams and popular lore by comparing the lives of Ming and Qing palace examination *optimi*, whose success spawned a remarkable literature about the temples they visited, the dreams that they or members of their family had, and the fateful events in their early lives that were premonitions of their later success. Literati encoded in these stories their unconscious ties to a common culture and religion, which encompassed both elites and commoners, and tempered their own understanding of the mantic forces of “fate” operating in the prohibitive examination marketplace.

Chapter 6 begins Part III by describing the limits of imperial power when rulers and elites equated social and political order with moral and political indoctrination through a civilizing education. Give and take between literati elites and their rulers meant that changes in the examinations were needed to keep the political and social partnership between them on track. High-minded officials often appealed for the relative autonomy of education in private academies as an antidote to the warping of classical educational goals by the cutthroat examinations in prison-like compounds. Private academies frequently became centers for dissenting political views, and they often paid a political price for such activism (the story of the late Ming Donglin Academy, which was first purged and then destroyed in the early sixteenth century, is an example of one such tragedy). Such Yangzi delta academies also served as important educational venues for literati who preferred teaching and lecturing on classical learning to their students. When compared with some 500 Song and 400 Yuan dynasty private academies, the Ming overall had from 1,000 to 2,000 such academies by its end. The Qing had upward of 4,000 empire-wide, a small number considering that the population reached 300 million by 1800.⁶

Chapter 7 reveals that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries new trends in classical learning successfully penetrated the examination curriculum. Drawing on provincial and metropolitan policy questions and answers preserved in examination archives, we see how essential doctrines associated with “Way learning” were increasingly gainsaid by policy questions prepared by evidential research scholars serving as examiners outside their home area of the Yangtze delta. They brought the examinations into closer touch with the changing intellectual context after 1650.

In Chapter 7, I also review the perennial debates about the role of policy questions on civil examinations during the Ming and Qing dynasties. First I document the rise of “reliable learning” (*kaoju xue*) as a type of policy question that became common during the late fifteenth century. This was the first widespread use of this term as a scholarly category, and this finding enables us to tie the later emergence of “evidential research” (*kaozheng xue*) during the seventeenth century to the earlier evolution of civil examination policy questions. It also establishes

a Ming precedent for the later revival of policy questions dealing with evidential research that occurred during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In the eighteenth century, ancient learning guidelines were also applied to the civil examination curriculum. As a result, the “Way learning” rejection of Tang-Song *belles lettres* in civil examinations was turned back. Policy questions on historical studies changed in tone and content from championing “Way learning” historical idealism during the Ming dynasty to favoring ancient Han dynasty-style historical traditions. The scope and content of the policy questions reflected the academic inroads of Qing classical scholarship, particularly evidential studies.

Chapter 8 turns to the examination reforms of the second half of the eighteenth century. Beginning in the 1740s, officials in the Hanlin Academy and the Ministry of Rites debated a series of new initiatives that challenged the classical curriculum in place since the early Ming. Qing officials restored pre-Song aspects of the civil examinations that had been eliminated in the Yuan and Ming dynasties, such as poetry and the discourse essay. Surviving memorials to the emperor reveal that irate officials in 1757–1758 challenged the decision to drop the discourse essay because of its importance to “Way learning” and imperial orthodoxy. The revival of a poetry question on local, provincial, and metropolitan civil examinations after 1756 was the first in a series of curricular reforms to make examinations more difficult for the increasing numbers of classically literate candidates. In addition, the formalistic requirements of the poetry question gave examiners an additional tool, along with the 8-legged essay, to grade papers more efficiently, if not more fairly.

Chapter 8 also describes how the Taiping Rebellion marked a major divide in the history of civil examinations. After 1865, more radical reforms were initiated to meet the challenges of the Taiping Rebellion and Western imperialism. The levels of corruption and increased purchase of lower and even provincial degrees to raise emergency government funds for the civil war were unprecedented after 1850. As a satisfactory, natural form of selection that produced graduates in biennial and triennial competitions, the criteria of selection were themselves often scrutinized. Such scrutiny frequently dissolved into literati rhetoric, while the dynasty’s unrelenting examination regime remained in place, enticing

millions of men to compete with each other to memorize the classical curriculum. Ironically, the Taipings recognized its efficacy and instituted their own Christian-based civil examinations, the first full-blown assault on the classical content of the examinations, while at the same time preserving their institutional form.

As the Epilogue to Chapter 8 shows, new political, institutional, and cultural forms emerged during the transition from the Qing dynasty to the Republic of China, which challenged the creedal system of the late empire and refracted its political institutions. The emperor, his bureaucracy, and literati cultural forms quickly became symbols of backwardness. Traditional forms of knowledge about the natural world, for example, were uncritically labeled as “superstition” (*mixin*, lit., “confused belief”), while “modern science” in its European and American forms was championed by a new intelligentsia as the path to knowledge, enlightenment, and national power. Perhaps the most representative change occurred in the precipitous dismantling of the political, social, and cultural functions of the Ming-Qing civil examination regime that lasted from 1370 to 1905. With little to replace them, the new Republic in effect de-canonized its predecessor’s institutions, without providing a durable educational substitute or creedal system.

My goal is not to rehabilitate the imperial Chinese examination system. It perished in 1905. Instead, over a century after its demise, we gain a sense of how a carefully balanced and constantly contested piece of educational and social engineering was worked out by cooperation between the imperial dynasty and its literati–gentry elites between 1400 and 1900. The partnership worked fairly successfully until the Taiping civil war, when the cataclysmic decline of literati culture and imperial institutions began.

Rather, I present civil examinations in late imperial China as precocious harbingers of their global use in the merit-based social selection and political circulation of elites worldwide after 1900. In Qing China, examinations served as a flawed but well-oiled “educational gyroscope” whose intense, self-centered motion every two or three years within capital, provincial, prefectural, and county examination compounds was the *sine qua non* for gentry officials and aristocratic rulers to maintain their proper balance and direction between each other and vis-à-vis

the society at large. After 1865 the educational gyroscope was recalibrated by a weakening Manchu dynasty that had lost its bearings. Instead of recognizing the sources of their dynastic success, the court and its officials eventually took apart the gyroscope.

The irony, of course, is that just the opposite was happening in the rest of the world. Large-scale examination systems now undergird public education globally, including in the People's Republic of China. We forget that the University of London began in the mid-nineteenth century as an "Examination University," for example. With just mortar and no teaching faculty, its administrators monitored examinations and handed out degrees to those who passed. If the University of London is a modern example of an examination regime and "distance learning," then China represents the first and most precocious such system. Ming-Qing classical examinations are an underestimated harbinger of the modern versions to come.⁷

Global events after 1850 should not be used as a simple-minded measure of a system of bureaucratic reproduction that lasted intact in its late imperial form up to 1905. Our response to a cultural and educational regime that so many millions of Han Chinese and thousands of Mongols and Manchus before 1905 willingly submitted to, that thousands of others rebelled against, and that many cheated their way into should be more cautious. That 50,000–75,000 or more licensed but nervous male candidates, usually ranging in age from fifteen to fifty, appeared empire-wide every three years at the gates of the seventeen provincial examination compounds, when in all likelihood during the late Ming and Qing dynasty only 1 to 3 percent would graduate, was unprecedented until the twentieth century.

To assess the historical significance of this educational regime and its external machinery, we require a thorough sociocultural study that does not take the machinery of the selection process for granted. Otherwise, we are unable to grasp why it lasted so long or why it was emulated in Korea and Vietnam but not Japan. Millions of male Chinese of all ages, as well as their families and kin, dreamed of entering the forbidding examination compounds in provincial capitals and in Beijing, which, from the outside looking in, were more akin to "cultural prisons" than educational institutions. What was going on inside?

PART I

Becoming Mainstream:
“Way Learning” during
the Late Empire

Ming Imperial Power, Cultural Politics, and Civil Examinations

SINCE THE EARLY EMPIRE of Qin and Han (ca. 221 BCE–220 CE) and the medieval era of Sui and Tang (581–907), China's government balanced between the emperor and bureaucracy. The interests of each dynasty were never uniformly decided in favor of the ruler or his officials. Nor was there an essentialized “state” that served the emperor and his court without resistance from the bureaucracy and the scholar-officials serving there. Nevertheless, the late imperial government was in important ways semiautonomous from the landed gentry elites who filled the bureaucracy via civil examination success. The ruling house maintained its pedigree for an imperial aristocracy whose interests were often asymmetrical with the class-based interests of gentry elites. The court thought through its politics based on its own interests. In other words, the partnership, however troubled at times, between the Ming state and the literati mattered historically.¹

During non-Han-led dynasties, such as the Mongol Yuan (1280–1368) and Manchu Qing (1644–1911), court interests could supersede bureaucratic or local Han elites. Given the differences between imperial interests and literati values, each dynasty redefined the partnership between the ruler and gentry-officials. This dynamic arrangement made imperial political culture vital and adaptive. In the first reigns of the Ming (1368–1644), however, the balance of power tilted in favor of the ruler and

further altered the generally peaceful story of the overlap between the court and literati ideals before the Mongol conquest.

Early Ming rulers enforced a terror that curtailed the executive branches of the bureaucracy. For a time between 1380 and 1402, they carried out bloody political purges that made it seem as if emperors were at last all powerful. Ming “autocracy,” as it has since been called, was not the end of the partnership between state and society, however. Despite the growth of the court’s power, literati were still able to prevail on early Ming emperors to enhance the role of “Way learning” in government. Some have interpreted this enhancement simply as the political legitimation of Ming autocracy. But why choose Cheng-Zhu (Cheng Yi [1033–1107] and Zhu Xi [1130–1200]) “Way learning” then? Ming emperors needed their officials to rule effectively and still used relatively impartial civil examinations to choose them. Rulers also made the values of their gentry elites the sacred doctrines of the dynasty because, in part, that is what Ming elites and rulers themselves professed.²

Why did Song dynasty “Way learning” become imperial orthodoxy in late imperial China? Why was so much political violence required? In raising these two questions, we move from the timeless integrity of educational and cultural positions to the political, social, cultural, and economic contingencies of ideas in particular historical contexts. Instead of just interrogating ideas in “texts” for their universal “meaning,” we also decipher how they reveal the particular “contexts” of those whose actions were informed and served by references to those ideas. This chapter will address the ideals of “Way learning” and their historical uses by Ming-Qing rulers, scholar-officials, and literati.³

Early Ming Developments

Wang Anshi’s (1021–1086) failure to reform the Song dynasty (960–1280) government in the 1060s and 1070s alarmed everyone. Some Song scholar-official elites led by Cheng Yi, Cheng Hao (1032–1085), and other classical savants devised new arguments, later called “Way learning,” to renegotiate Wang’s statecraft initiatives by shifting the rhetoric from favoring an activist political economy to returning to a conservative moral agenda. This post-Wang Anshi conservative vision provided a convinc-

ing set of metaphysical doctrines and ethical teachings that stressed character development. These teachings held that (1) the moral cultivation of the literatus was the basis for self-awakening, (2) family and lineage accord derived from improving individual character, and (3) the moral cultivation of officials would yield an enlightened statecraft. Thereafter, one of the most compelling literati ideals was achieving sagehood.⁴

“Way learning” advocates faced several dilemmas after the Song capital of Kaifeng unexpectedly fell to an invading army of Jurchen in 1127, however. The Song now found itself surrounded by several independent and relatively equal dynasties in East Asia, the most important being the Khitan Liao (916–1125) and Jurchen Jin (1115–1234). The dynamic role of the Khitan and Jurchen peoples in setting up dynasties in northeast China meant that each could legitimately claim as its *raison d’être* the rebuilding of a “Greater China.” Song remnants retrenched by moving the Song capital south in 1127 to the ocean port of Hangzhou in Zhejiang province. Far from landlocked Kaifeng on the North China Plain, the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1280), as it was called, survived precariously as one of several claimants of the legacy of the greater Tang imperium.⁵

Spreading as part of this southern turn in Song politics and society, “Way learning” slowly but surely addressed the southern literati need for growing autonomy in a time of political decentralization. Those who appreciated the potential affinity between literati autonomy and “Way learning” after 1127 made a virtue out of Song weakness. Literati, not the dynasty or the ruler, represented the values of moral cultivation and sagehood ideals. After the demise of Wang Anshi’s reforms and the loss of the North, for example, literati well inland in southeastern Jiangxi province and in the nearby southern Zhejiang fortress city of Wuzhou (renamed “Jinhua” in the Ming) became prominent advocates of “Way learning.” Their influence grew in the Mongol era. Coincidentally, it was in Wuzhou, which he renamed, that Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398), the future first Ming emperor, and his troops sojourned while enduring a brutal civil war.⁶

During the Song and Yuan, the spread of “Way learning” orthodoxy was localized in places such as Wuzhou. Moreover, “Way learning” and

imperial politics were vacillating partners in the waning years of the Southern Song. For example, the Southern Song state officially labeled “Way learning” as “heterodox” (*xiexue*) circa 1197, placing Zhu Xi under house arrest until his death.⁷ During the succeeding Yuan dynasty, a limited partnership between Mongol courtiers and a few Han scholar-officials helped persuade Kublai Khan and his successors to draw up orthodox guidelines for a partial revival of Song imperial examinations, which resumed in 1314. The Yuan held only fifteen metropolitan examinations, however, and only 1,136 palace degrees (*jinsshi*) were awarded between 1315 and 1368, an average of just twenty-one per annum, far below the over 39,000 distributed under the Song at a rate of 124 annually.⁸

Moreover, many literati scholars, generally prevented from joining the Yuan dynasty as high officials, turned to alternative careers. Disgruntled or impecunious literati chose unconventional careers ranging from medicine to the literary and theatrical arts. Literati eremitism, a legitimate Chinese response to alien rule, also meant that when the Ming dynasty officially replaced the Yuan, the new ruler would have to find ways to attract local scholars into government service. The emperor’s ability to recruit talented men and assign them positions in the bureaucracy and local governance was central to his legitimacy, but early Ming emperors wanted this collaboration on their terms.⁹

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, “Way learning” remained a widespread but still localized literati persuasion, enough so, however, that it was one of the major candidates to become the Ming’s mainstream vision of itself.¹⁰ But this chapter will show it took Ming historical events to forge and consummate the supremacy of “Way learning.” The Cheng brothers’ works and Zhu Xi’s collected commentaries, for example, may have become the core curriculum for the limited late Yuan civil examinations, but the massive reproduction of Cheng-Zhu learning as state orthodoxy dates from the early Ming. After a false start in 1368, the Cheng-Zhu persuasion gained political muscle as an orthodox dynastic ideology in 1384 when it was transmitted through dynasty-wide civil examinations from local counties and prefectures to provincial and imperial capitals. Examination questions traveled from the top down. Candidates came from the bottom up. The emperor, however, still had to ensure that

the bidirectional process enshrined his legitimacy, too, and not just that of the culturally ambitious literati.

Fresh from his victories over his bitter rivals in the Yangzi delta, Zhu Yuanzhang in the 1360s foresaw a government under the emperor balanced between a civil and military bureaucracy. It was by no means certain after the reigns of Khitan, Jurchen, and Mongol horsemen that the civil bureaucracy would automatically preside over its military counterpart. Would the Ming civil examinations, for example, follow the literary focus of Southern Song and Jin dynasty tests? Or would they continue the Yuan precedent in favor of “Way learning” and scrap the Song balance between metrical composition and classical essays?¹¹

According to the Yuan literatus Yu Ji (1272–1348), the official recognition granted the Cheng-Zhu “school of principle” had been one of the Mongol dynasty’s major accomplishments.¹² Through the intervention particularly of the southern Zhejiang literatus Liu Ji (1311–1375), who had passed the 1333 Yuan palace examination and subsequently became one of Zhu Yuanzhang’s most trusted advisers beginning in 1366, the emperor chose Yuan models based on “Way learning” for testing candidates for office.¹³

A year before he ascended the throne in 1368, Zhu Yuanzhang announced his plans to hold civil and military service examinations to recruit officials. The message he had derived from his early Wuzhou/Jinhua supporters was clear: the literatus would again be actively recruited for public service. To bridge civilian, cultural, and ethnic gaps in the imperial system that had emerged under Jurchen and Mongol governance, Zhu Yuanzhang invited literati in 1368 to recommend local talents for appointments. An early adept of the millenarian White Lotus Buddhist sects that had revolted against Mongol rule, the emperor was persuaded by literati elites from southern Zhejiang province, where his forces had sojourned for a time between 1355 and 1360, to don the ideological garb of a classical sage-king and reunify the literati of the empire and rekindle the orthodox “Way learning” legacy of the Song dynasties.¹⁴

Anxious to gain the support of Han literati, he officially acknowledged in 1369 the classical vision whereby “the educational transformation of the people was the prerequisite for the ordering of the dynasty and . . . schools were the basis for such transformation.” He ordered

prefectures and counties to establish official schools, where, according to the literati ideal, officials would be trained and provide governance via education. They would in turn nourish the people's needs and help them form healthy customs.¹⁵

To fill the bureaucracy with new officials, provincial civil examinations were held yearly for all pacified provinces between 1370 and 1372. The first metropolitan civil examination was in Nanjing in 1371.¹⁶ Following but going beyond the Yuan model, the first Ming emperor reconstituted a selection and appointment process that effectively replaced Mongol rule and established bureaucratic channels beyond the capital and provinces. For the first time, the selection process regularly penetrated down to counties and prefectures in the search for classically literate men to enter officialdom. In addition, Zhu enlarged the local scope of the Song and Yuan civil examination selection process by instituting for the first time regular county and prefectural licensing examinations. Sons of merchants were now also eligible for selection.¹⁷

During the early Ming, however, reproduction of the bureaucracy was not premised on the literati mastery of "Way learning" alone. There were deeper political and cultural matters at stake. Early Ming emperors feared that the selection system might undercut their power and give southern constituencies in the bureaucracy too much political power. Zhu Yuanzhang as the founding Hongwu (Expansive martial) emperor feared dissenting political messages in the Classics and held the civil examinations in abeyance from 1371 until 1384, even though his Jiangxi and Wuzhou/Jinhua elites recommended the Cheng-Zhu persuasion.

At first glance, the Jinhua version of Cheng-Zhu learning seemed to provide the needed cultural language of imperial power for the Hongwu emperor and his successors to claim the mantle of the sage-kings. They could effectively repossess the "legitimate transmission of the Way" (*daotong*) and reestablish their "political legitimacy" (*zhitong*, lit., "legitimate transmission of governance") in literati eyes. Such appropriations were easier said than done, however. The literati, too, understood themselves through the language of Cheng-Zhu learning. From their reading of "Way learning," the literati, not the rulers, had repossessed the Way. They could partner with the sagely emperor, but he had to share

power with them as potential sages with inordinate influence in local society.¹⁸

“Way learning” was now required for the proper mastery of the Four Books and Five Classics curriculum. The political, social, and cultural regulations of the civil examination system favored classical norms of governance but under post-Yuan historical conditions. The civil service process, its curriculum, forms of testing, and routines for official appointment made it one of the key institutions that bridged the Mongol era and permitted Southern Song “Way learning” to advance from a regional literati movement based in places such as Wuzhou/Jinhua to a dynasty-wide orthodoxy that flourished even more widely in Qing times.¹⁹

Between 1371 and 1384, Zhu Yuanzhang battled with his classical advisers, putting many—including his Jinhua favorites—to death. The “Way learning” that Zhu and his imperial successors favored would not valorize the literatus over the ruler, as Wuzhou/Jinhua scholars since the Southern Song and Yuan had implied should be the case. Refashioning the literati-centered rhetoric of “Way learning” to suit the Ming court required not only changes in conceptualization and discourse. The Hongwu emperor also reworked his bureaucracy through massive purges. Tens of thousands of officials perished. Via state control of symbolic and material violence, early Ming emperors tried to ensure that the most heralded voice of “Way learning” in the court and dynasty-wide became the ruler’s, not just that of the literati. The state and its literati faced off over the political meaning of “Way learning.”

Mencius and Ming Civil Examinations

During the early Ming, Jinhua and Jiangxi literati especially hoped that the Hongwu emperor would revive Song cultural ideals. Zhu Yuanzhang, however sympathetic, believed power descended downward from the ruler to his officials and subjects. The Ming founder tolerated no public threat to his political legitimacy or any classical limits on his personal power.²⁰ The former peasant-soldier sought legitimation by relying on his southern Jinhua advisers. He also learned to admire the statist institutions and rituals presented in the *Rituals of Zhou* (*Zhouli*).

This source book of statecraft traditions since the early empire, later used to authorize the Northern Song's failed reform program, was also frequently cited in the early Ming. Zhu Yuanzhang's rural control system for village tax collection and household registration, for instance, had its locus classicus in the *Rituals of Zhou*.²¹ According to the same logic, the emperor was persuaded that the classical canon based on "Way learning" would best serve the Ming dynasty—as it had the Yuan—for the civil examination curriculum.²²

One of the Four Books, the *Mencius*, angered Zhu Yuanzhang, however. Zhu was initially unschooled in the Classics, but he became a fast learner.²³ "Way learning" enshrined Mencius as Confucius's doctrinal successor in the lineage of orthodox teachings.²⁴ What infuriated the Hongwu emperor was the passage in the *Mencius* (part of session one on Ming civil provincial and metropolitan examinations) in which Mencius drew limits to the loyalty an official owed his ruler: "When the ruler regards his officials as the ground or the grass, they regard him as a robber and an enemy." Mencius claimed that the ruler served the people: "The people are the most important element; the spirits of the land and grain are the next; the sovereign is the least important."²⁵

Such political statements, Zhu Yuanzhang thought, challenged his dynasty's sovereignty, which emphasized the ruler's innate power. For Mencius the dynasty derived its power from the people. During the Former Han dynasty (207 BCE–9 CE), Mencius's view had evoked voluntarist strains that legitimated Confucius as an "uncrowned king" and decried false kings.²⁶ These threats to his new dynasty's sovereignty were more than Zhu Yuanzhang could tolerate. Pondering whether to abolish the civil examinations, he demanded the removal of the *Mencius* from the reading list for civil examination candidates because of its *lèse-majesté*, thus compromising the canonical stature of the Four Books. In addition, Zhu demanded that Mencius be removed from the sacrificial ceremony performed for Confucius and from the official pantheon of sages, scholars, and martyrs in the Confucian Temple.²⁷

Zhu's chief ministers tried to blunt the emperor's dangerous precedents, which threatened "Way learning" tenet. They agreed to remove the objectionable passages in the *Mencius*, but they successfully defended the remaining text. Because the examinations were stopped in

1373, this brouhaha was muted until 1384. Later a censored version of the *Menci* was used in the civil examinations after Zhu successfully purged his enemies from the civil and military bureaucracies.²⁸

Court autocracy strengthened when Zhu executed Hu Weiyong (d. 1380), the chief councilor from 1378 to 1380, for alleged treason. Earlier he had executed his Zhejiang adviser, Liu Ji, based on Hu Weiyong's charges of treason against Liu. Fearing continual ministerial efforts to usurp imperial power, the emperor liquidated all executive positions in the bureaucracy and placed all civilian and military offices in the bureaucracy under his control. The bloody purges of 1380 were repeated in 1390–1393. Estimates vary, but by Zhu Yuanzhang's own estimate perhaps 50,000 to 70,000 people were executed.²⁹ During the Tang dynasty, high officials sat with the emperor as social equals. Beginning with the Song dynasties, they stood in front of a seated emperor. Beginning under the Ming and continuing under the Qing, officials were required to prostrate themselves and kneel before him. Changes in the rites of audience corresponded to the growing authoritarian nature of dynastic power that peaked in the early Ming.³⁰

When the civil examinations resumed in 1384, Ming examiners linked the moral cultivation of the mind to the sagely qualities of emperors, not literati. In their questions, the examiners frequently pressed candidates on their knowledge of the “method of the mind” (*xinfa*) and its centrality for imperial governance.³¹ This precedent, reproduced in later examination essays, became a mantra about the emperor's cultural prestige under Qing Manchu rulers as well.³² By the mid-Ming, emperors were already extolled over literati for reestablishing the “legitimate transmission of the Way,” a position never granted publicly by strident Wuzhou/Jinhua literati in Song or Yuan times.³³ The third-place graduate in 1547 wrote on his palace essay, for example, that “the rulers in Han, Tang [618–907], and Song had positions but no learning, while . . . the four Song masters had learning but no achievements. That was why in the preceding hundreds and thousands of years the transmission of the Way had been interrupted.” The upshot was that only the early Ming emperors successfully combined “Way learning” and imperial governance. Jinhua and other Jiangxi literati acquiesced to this betrayal of their ideals or they lost their heads.³⁴

Because Ming emperors selected Cheng-Zhu learning to verbalize their rule, they tied the *raison d'être* of their dynasty to that persuasion and committed the bureaucracy to its educational propagation in schools and on civil examinations. At times mainstream classical learning was diffuse and came from wider literati circles, including Jinhua in the early Ming; at other times it was the narrow core of the civil examination curriculum. “Way learning” as a moral philosophy provided concepts, arguments, and beliefs that both Ming rulers and officials endorsed for legitimate political sovereignty. The emperor and the bureaucracy who spoke for him, not local literati, had the final say on how “Way learning” concepts and beliefs became educational practice and performative politics via examinations.³⁵

Mencian political idealism survived, however. Imperial power could not completely eliminate literati dissent. In the 1385 palace examinations, the Jiangxi literatus Lian Zining (d. 1402) prepared an audacious answer for Zhu Yuanzhang’s policy question. The Hongwu emperor’s question stressed his devotion to models of antiquity in setting up the Ming dynasty.³⁶ Lian Zining boldly transferred the blame for misgovernment to the emperor. He accused the emperor of creating a political atmosphere in which ancient Legalist schemes were dominant, resulting in a betrayal of the ideals of the sage-kings that the emperor wished to put into effect. How could the emperor expect to gain effective officials in such a political whirlwind?

It is not that your majesty’s intentions in criticizing shortcomings have been superficial. Nor has your intent in delegating responsibility been excessively cavalier. Yet the results of officials repaying the dynasty have been as bewildering as catching the wind. . . . Men are rapidly advanced owing to some small merit, and rapidly executed owing to some small fault. This is why men of talent disappoint you despite your earnest search for them. Moreover, the production of talent is very hard, but the nurturing of talent is even harder. Because you know how hard it is to produce such talented men, how can you bear to mutilate and execute them for trivial reasons? . . . How can you bear to murder and slay them and still say “I can use the talented men of the empire”?³⁷

Miraculously, Lian Zining survived his daring remonstrance. Clothing his views in an examination essay that he knew the emperor would read, Lian demonstrated that the classical way of governance was not the ruler's monopoly. Zhu Yuanzhang had executed thousands of officials for power seeking and alleged corruption. Perhaps he recognized in Lian an incorruptible literati voice, the very official he had sought. Not only did he spare Lian, but the emperor and his examiners awarded Lian second place in the palace examination. Lian was appointed to the Hanlin Academy. Instead of taking office, however, Lian returned home to deal with family matters. His later confrontation with Zhu Yuanzhang's successor ended in a bloodbath for Jiangxi literati.

Additional examination changes in 1384 incorporated Han (207 BCE–220 CE) and Tang (618–907) traditions in legal studies and documentary style. As summarized in Table 1.1, the format outlines that in session two of the provincial and metropolitan examinations imperial examiners also stressed administrative writings: imperial patents (*Han zhao*), imperial proclamations (*Tang gao*), and dynastic edicts (*Song biao*). The edicts continued the Tang-Song ceremony of graduates expressing their gratitude upon passing the examinations. Parading at the head of all palace graduates, each Ming and Qing *optimus* presented the emperor with a “memorial of gratitude” (*xiebiao*) as their first act as imperial officials.³⁸

In Table 1.1 we see that the ability to compose prose remained a clear marker of elite social status during the Ming and Qing dynasties. When we remind ourselves of the centrality in later years of the infamous “8-legged essay” for which “Way learning” was the required content in a literary exercise also testing stylistic form, we see how incomplete the “Way learning” victory over Tang-Song belles lettres was. Ming-Qing civil examination essays were judged explicitly on their content (principles, i.e., *li*) and their form (style, i.e., *wen*). Poetry remained a mark of the “man of culture” (*wenren*) throughout.

Legal essay questions called “judgments” (*pan*) were common during the Tang and Song as specialty examinations.³⁹ Such tests of legal expertise had focused on penal laws in two key areas: (1) prescriptive administrative laws and (2) proscriptive penal laws. A candidate for office was expected to demonstrate his knowledge of the actual content of

Table 1.1. Format of Provincial and Metropolitan Civil Service Examinations during the Ming Dynasty, 1384–1643.

Session No.	No. of Questions
One	
1. <i>Four Books</i>	3 quotations
2. <i>Change</i>	4 quotations
3. <i>Documents</i>	4 quotations
4. <i>Poetry</i>	4 quotations
5. <i>Springs and Autumns</i>	4 quotations
6. <i>Rites</i>	4 quotations
Two	
1. Discourse	1 quotation
2. Documentary style	3 documents
3. Judicial terms	5 terms
Three	
1. Policy questions	5 essays

Note: On session one, all candidates were expected to specialize on one of the Five Classics and write essays for only that Classic. This requirement lasted until 1756.

statutes and ordinances in the code.⁴⁰ When the judicial terms (*panyu*) were introduced in early Ming metropolitan civil examinations, this reform represented a conscious effort to heed the call for “practical learning” (*shixue*) by the Hongwu emperor.

As noted earlier, Zhu Yuanzhang stopped examinations after 1372, because, he claimed, the graduates who took office were not practically trained.⁴¹ The Ming Code was first compiled in 1373, revised in 1376, and completed in 1389. In 1381, Zhu Yuanzhang ordered all official students to study Ming laws and regulations.⁴² From 1384 until 1643, Ming provincial and metropolitan civil examinations included legal terms on session two. This testing regime continued until 1756, when the Qing abandoned legal questions in favor of Tang-Song metrical poetry.⁴³

Using “Way learning,” Zhu Yuanzhang put together a late imperial examination model that (1) tested the Four Books and Five Classics in light of Cheng-Zhu moral philosophy, (2) expected candidates to write administrative documents in ancient forms and to master the dynasty’s legal code, and (3) required policy essays based on contemporary affairs. Han dynasty policy questions and medieval specialty examinations, which had preceded the rise of the classical essay, were revived along

with Cheng-Zhu learning, and all remained a constant feature of triennial provincial and metropolitan civil examinations from 1384 until 1757.⁴⁴

Subsequently, Liu Sanwu (1312–1399?), who entered the Hanlin Academy in 1384, was entrusted in 1394 with preparation of a formal edition of the *Mencius* that deleted eighty-eight sections the emperor found objectionable. The expurgated version was entitled the *Abridged Text of the Mencius* (*Mengzi jiewen*). Thereafter, the censored *Mencius* became the standard text for civil examination candidates until 1414–1415, when the original was curiously restored after a coup d'état. Zhu Yuanzhang succeeded, however, in removing Mencius's tablet from Confucius's ancestral temple in Qufu, making it clear that the Ming dynasty opposed the Mencian valorization of the people over the ruler.⁴⁵

Zhu Yuanzhang also had second thoughts about the civil examination system because of his distrust of southern Chinese literati; Yangzi delta gentry based in Suzhou prefecture in particular troubled him because they had sided with Zhu's rivals in the late Yuan struggle for succession. Their wealth and cultural prestige sharply contrasted with his humble beginnings in rural Anhui province. For Ming and Qing rulers, the "South" represented a difficult but essential region to integrate into the empire.⁴⁶ Moreover, if the examination process were allowed to function without regional quotas, southern literati would dominate the competition. Keeping the bureaucracy from becoming hostage to southerners became an important imperial goal in the early Ming, a policy that lasted until 1904, when the last dynasty relinquished quotas in educational administration.

Northern versus Southern Quotas

Because the civil examinations tested classical texts drawn from antiquity, they were essentially administered in a written language that diverged from vernacular Chinese. The myriad dialects of Ming China had been influenced, particularly in the North, by interaction with non-Chinese peoples.⁴⁷ To acquire the cultural training necessary for the civil service, most students mastered written classical Chinese, whose terseness, thousands of unusual written graphs, and archaic grammatical forms required memorization and constant attention from childhood

to manhood. A classical education with its empowering literacy was a minimum guarantor of examination success.⁴⁸

Since the Northern Song, cutthroat competition for the limited number of degrees, particularly the highly coveted palace degree, meant that an official appointment was not guaranteed. A ratio of 1:10 was not unusual for a candidate's likelihood of succeeding in the final competition.⁴⁹ Because of the South's higher economic productivity and larger population, which translated into superior cultural resources for the rigorous private education needed to prepare for the examinations, Chinese living in the southern provinces initially faced an even harder hurdle in provincial examinations.⁵⁰ Competition for successful places in the provincial examinations was 100:1 in the Southeast and only 10:1 in the Northwest.⁵¹

Because of this differential, southern candidates for the palace examination were better prepared for the required literary answers. A cult of literary style emerged in the South, while northern literati emphasized substance, that is, classical doctrine.⁵² Southern dominance in the early civil examinations became a ticklish problem for the Hongwu emperor and his successors. Zhu Yuanzhang's efforts to limit the domination of the civil examinations and, thus, appointment to political office by southerners led him to suspend the examinations. To keep the examination market from becoming a southern monopoly, Zhu echoed the Song literati cultural distinction between the "refinement" of the Southeast and the "simplicity" of the Northwest.⁵³

The Yangzi delta elite's support of his archenemy's claim to the throne in final military campaigns lasting from 1365 to 1367 also contributed to the decision to close the civil examinations as part of early Ming economic policy.⁵⁴ The Hongwu emperor specifically prohibited appointment of Suzhou or Songjiang natives to the post of Minister of Revenue, which was intended to prevent natives of these wealthy prefectures from controlling the fiscal administration of their native place.⁵⁵ Zhu Yuanzhang's control of the South's economic resources paralleled his efforts to thwart the South's translation of wealth into the cultural resources needed for examination and hence civil service success.⁵⁶

The less affluent North, with its relatively poorer families and lineages, was at a cultural disadvantage in a civil service competition that

still tested the literary elegance of classical learning.⁵⁷ Lineage schools in the South were jealously guarded private possessions whereby the elites of southern society, particularly in the Yangzi delta, competed with each other for social, political, and academic ascendancy. Corporate estates thus played a central role in perpetuating an economic and political environment in which southern gentry and merchants were since Song times educationally dominant. By the late Ming, schools for sons of merchants also emerged in the Yangzi delta.⁵⁸

If the Hongwu emperor wanted to keep southern literati from monopolizing the civil examination in the 1380s, he failed. Of the 472 graduates in 1385, for example, 340 (72 percent) came from southern provinces, while only 132 (28 percent) were from the North. Although regional quotas were not set for the metropolitan examinations, as they had been for provincial examinations, Zhu Yuanzhang remained concerned about the southern problem. In an exchange in 1389, in which the emperor was discussing public governance, Liu Sanwu spoke condescendingly of the differences between coarse northerners and elegant southerners, to which Zhu Yuanzhang objected and replied that southerners had no monopoly on being gentlemen.⁵⁹

In the spring 1397 palace examination, the Hongwu emperor discovered that all fifty-two graduates were southern literati.⁶⁰ The emperor asked Liu Sanwu, the chief examiner, to reread the failed papers from the prior metropolitan examination to ascertain possible favoritism. Liu, a southern literatus, reported back that no changes in ranking were necessary. Liu explained: "In our selection there has been no division between northerners and southerners. It is just that south of the great Yangzi there are many outstanding literati. Northern literati just don't compare to southerners." The emperor angrily replied: "Can it be as you say that there are no outstanding literati north of the Yangzi?"

Outraged, Zhu Yuanzhang had at least two of the readers executed (some dismembered in public), but he spared Liu Sanwu for past service. Zhu then read the metropolitan examination papers himself. After ranking the papers, he held a second palace examination. Ironically, the subject for the second palace examination was the emperor's complaint that after thirty years in power he still needed to complement civil rule with penal measures. Under such imperial pressure, the metropolitan

and palace rolls of 1397 palace graduates were reissued with sixty-one graduates, this time all northerners. Thereafter, examiners took careful note of the geographical background of palace candidates. A bureaucratic pigeonhole was devised to identify the geographical origins of examination papers; examiners thereafter designated anonymous papers either as a “northern” or “southern paper.”⁶¹

Despite the emperor’s intervention in 1397, he did not set a permanent quota for palace degrees, but he did raise the issue for official scrutiny. Southern domination of the palace rolls continued at above the 80 percent level until a regional quota was set by the Hongxi emperor (r. 1425), which granted northern candidates 40 percent of all places in the metropolitan examinations. During the 1427 metropolitan examination, the quota was revised slightly to grant northerners 35 percent, southerners 55 percent, and those from the “central region” 10 percent of all places. The central region quota was established in 1427 to deal with marginal areas. This ratio was followed until the late Ming and reiterated in the Qing.⁶²

The quotas set an absolute limit on the degree of dominance southern gentry-literati could achieve, but quotas alone could not equalize the competition for the highest rankings in the palace examinations, which determined whether a graduate was first appointed to the court, the metropolitan and provincial bureaucracy, or local prefectures and counties. The highest ranked palace graduates generally came from the South and consequently were more likely to be appointed to the court-connected Hanlin Academy or other high capital positions. The 1425 quota reform did guarantee northerners access to the lower levels of the civil service.⁶³ Only after 1450, when an acceptable regional quota system for palace degrees was in place, did civil examinations become the chief route to high office.⁶⁴

From Usurper to Sage: The “Everlasting Happiness” (Yongle) Reign

The Yongle (Everlasting happiness, r. 1402–1424) reign of Zhu Di (1360–1424) began with a divisive civil war in 1399 followed by a bloodbath in Nanjing in 1402. When the Yongle reign ended in 1424, Zhu Di, the former Prince of Yan in Beiping, was declared a ruler in the line of the ancient sage-kings. The Yongle emperor also claimed that he and his father

had repossessed the “legitimate transmission of the Way” (*daotong*), whereas Han, Tang, and Song emperors had never earned “political legitimacy” (*zhitong*).⁶⁵

Zhu Di could not have made such claims without literati support. Nor could he have succeeded in his claim of becoming a sage-king without ameliorating the troubled marriage between “Way learning” and the Hongwu emperor. Despite his bloody rise to power, Zhu Di restored the dynasty’s partnership with literati by expanding the scope and magnitude of the civil examination curriculum beyond the limits his father had imposed. Thereafter, “Way learning” increasingly permeated political life during the Ming dynasty. But the tragic bloodletting of literati has been written out of the narrative of Ming “Way learning” orthodoxy, a silenced history that Manchu rulers discreetly acknowledged when they overthrew the Ming.⁶⁶

When Zhu Di sought to install himself by force as the “Everlasting Happiness” emperor in 1402, he asked the Eastern Zhejiang scholar Fang Xiaoru and then capital vice-censor Lian Zining to serve him. Recall that Lian had berated Zhu Yuanzhang in his palace essay for Zhu’s heartless execution of his ministers. Fang served only the Jianwen emperor (r. 1399–1402), but Lian had served both the founding Hongwu and succeeding Jianwen emperor. When Lian rebuked the prince for his usurpation, Zhu Di had Lian’s tongue cut off to silence him. The Prince of Yan then justified his occupation of the Ming capital and ascent to the throne in place of the Jianwen emperor by saying: “My only desire was to emulate the Duke of Zhou, who came to support young King Cheng.”⁶⁷

Lian apparently put his finger to his mouth and using his blood traced on the ground the sentence “Where is King Cheng?”⁶⁸ In Fang Xiaoru’s case the confrontation was equally chilling. The Prince of Yan, politely at first, demanded that Fang, a confidant of the Jianwen emperor and likely the last official to see him still alive, draft the announcement of the prince’s succession. When Fang labeled Zhu Di a criminal, the two men got into a heated argument.⁶⁹

Prince: I modeled myself on the Duke of Zhou who served King Cheng and
no more.

Fang Xiaoru: Where is King Cheng?

Prince: He burned himself to death [in the palace].

Fang: Why don't you establish King Cheng's son as emperor?

Prince: The dynasty requires a mature ruler.

Fang: Then why don't you establish King Cheng's younger brother as ruler?

Prince: These are my family's affairs and that's all.

The prince became agitated and gave Fang Xiaoru the writing brush to prepare the announcement of his accession. Fang threw the brush to the ground and in tears scornfully continued the argument:

Fang: If I must die, then so be it. I will not write the draft for the announcement.

Prince (loudly): How can you expect to die so suddenly? In dying are you not concerned about your relatives to the ninth degree?

Fang: What does it matter to me if you make it to the tenth degree?

Zhu Di, realizing that Fang Xiaoru—who knew what happened to the Jianwen emperor—would never acknowledge him as the new emperor, ordered his attendants to use knives to slit open Fang's mouth on both sides up to his ears. Then Fang was tossed back into prison, where his friends and followers were brought to him one by one. When Fang refused to see them, they were killed. Until his death he continued to mock Zhu Di for his pretensions and left a famous lyric for posterity.⁷⁰

"King Cheng" (i.e., the Jianwen emperor) was probably dead. Only the remains of the empress and their eldest son were found in the fire debris. A funeral service for the fallen ruler was carried out on July 20, one week after the fall of Nanjing, although rumors that the Jianwen emperor had escaped continued throughout the Ming dynasty.⁷¹ Lian Zining was executed, along with his entire family and lineage; over 150 people were murdered, some only distantly related (the ninth or tenth degree of kinship). Several hundred were banished. In Fang Xiaoru's case some 873 of his relatives were executed. Besides Fang and Lian, the kin of other Jianwen loyalists were also eliminated, with some estimates as high as ten thousand for the total number of officials and members of their families who were murdered in 1402.⁷²

The Jianwen reign was expunged from the historical records, becoming instead the thirty-first to the thirty-fifth years of the long-since-dead (d. 1398) Hongwu emperor.⁷³ “Veritable Records” of the early reigns were twice tampered with, and in the final version of the Hongwu reign they were doctored with falsehoods to confirm Zhu Di as the legitimate successor.⁷⁴ As the “Everlasting Happiness” emperor, Zhu Di became a powerful monarch, known posthumously as “Paramount scion” (Taizong) and “Emperor of culture” (Wen huangdi), the latter an ironic choice given the military means Zhu had used to remove his nephew, the “Establisher of Culture” (Jianwen) ruler, from the throne in 1402. After 1538, the Yongle emperor was granted the additional temple name “Formative ancestor” (Chengzu) by the then reigning Jiajing emperor (r. 1522–1566), who like Zhu Di established a new line of imperial succession.⁷⁵

Zhu Di became the second founder of the Ming dynasty (he moved the capital to Beijing in 1415–1421). Following the usurpation, Zhu Di actively promoted classical studies, especially the literati persuasion of “Way learning.” Zhu’s own *Method of the Mind in the Sages’ Teachings* (*Shengxue xinfa*), completed in 1409 and presented to his designated successor, was emblematic in his mind of the “legitimate transmission of the Way” (*daotong*), which he and his successors linked to their “political legitimacy” (*zhitong*). Both Zhu Yuanzhang and Zhu Di were canonized as the imperial successors of the sage-kings.⁷⁶

To become a moral paragon, however, Zhu Di discreetly restored the Mencian strain of political idealism that had cost both Fang Xiaoru and Lian Zining their lives—but also apotheosized them into literati martyrs. After usurping the throne from the Jianwen emperor, whom he accused of incompetence and heresy, and whose officials he described as traitorous vermin, Zhu Di actually stood to gain from Mencius’s legitimization of regicide. He himself had just removed an emperor whom he accused of corruption and immorality, and thus the “change in heaven’s mandate” (*tianming*) conveniently served his political needs in ways that his father had foreseen and opposed.⁷⁷

Perversely, what had offended Zhu Yuanzhang about Mencius’s words was welcomed by Zhu Di as justification for his military action. His nephew had been rightfully forced out. As early as 1404, Zhu Di decided

that Mencius should be restored to the imperial curriculum for rulers, although the expurgated version of the *Mencius* was still used as the official text through the 1409 metropolitan examination.⁷⁸ In 1409, Zhu Di had included in his preface to the *Method of the Mind in the Sages' Teachings* a full capitulation to the Mencian view that “the people were the basis of the dynasty.”⁷⁹ Zhu Di as emperor could have it either way—to hide or reveal his own true intentions—through the canon if he conceded the moral high ground to the “people” and restored the partnership between literati and the court to gain public support.⁸⁰

“Way learning” moral philosophy was utilized in part as political ideology to draw attention away from the events of 1402.⁸¹ But the Jianwen martyrs were also motivated by compelling literati political ideals that were still part of “Way learning” in the tumultuous early years of the fifteenth century. At the same time, the political usurper Zhu Di culturally appropriated “Way learning” and became a Ming sage-emperor. Both sides claimed classical orthodoxy. Zhu Di was the victor in the world of political power, but Lian Zining and Fang Xiaoru became larger-than-life legends in Jiangxi and Zhejiang local lore.

The seamless narrative of Zhu Yuanzhang's and Zhu Di's sageliness, despite the unspoken execution of thousands of officials, was continually reproduced in the civil examinations, where the early Ming dynasty could control the public record of its political and cultural legitimacy. The early Ming idealization of Ming sage-kings mattered historically because Zhu Di's successful usurpation of power in 1402 was later studied and emulated by the Manchu emperors of the Qing dynasty to justify their conquest of the Ming. The ideological uses of “Way learning” by Ming and Qing rulers were not fortuitous. During the Tang dynasty, Li Shimin (r. 626–649), for instance, assassinated his brother, the chosen successor, in 626 and then forced his father, Emperor Gaozu (r. 618–626), to abdicate in his favor. Later in 638, as Emperor Taizong, Li Shimin authorized compilation of the *Orthodox Meanings in the Five Classics (Wujing zhengyi)* to provide the definitive commentaries for classical learning in Tang civil examinations.⁸²

After the fall of the Song dynasty, Yuan, Ming, and Qing rulers chose “Way learning” to serve this ideological function. When compared with the alternatives offered by Buddhism, Daoism, and popular religion,

which Mongol, Han Chinese, and Manchu emperors also affiliated with to assert dynastic legitimacy among commoners,⁸³ their appeal to “Way learning” put rulers in touch with their most lettered and influential elite, Han Chinese literati.⁸⁴ The elective affinity between the Ming dynasty (the ruler and his bureaucracy) and literati thought (“Way learning”) was exploited by both sides. A marriage of cultural and political convenience between the ruler and his literati officials lurked beneath the tumultuous events of 1402.⁸⁵

On the other side were the martyrs such as Fang Xiaoru and Lian Zining who defied ideology and status to choose martyrdom. “Way learning” served both sides. The *raison d’être* for both power and idealism was located in the classical canon. An analysis of the precise cultural content of imperial ideology in early Ming China enables us to see how “Way learning” served both imperial purposes and elite interests after 1402. The stark legend of Lian Zining and Fang Xiaoru eludes contextualization, however. They had leaped from historical contingency to timelessness. The actions of the “Jianwen martyrs” never became part of the Ming or Qing civil examination curriculum. Nor were they an object of official study until the eve of the fall of the Ming dynasty in the seventeenth century. Their legends lived on, however, as millions of Ming and Qing dynasty examination candidates relearned in the *Documents Classic* of the sagely model set by the Duke of Zhou in dutifully serving his brother’s son, King Cheng.

Establishing a Late Imperial “Way Learning” Curriculum

The cultural work needed to augment Zhu Di’s “Way learning” legitimacy was carried out by men who made the transition from serving the Jianwen emperor to submitting to the Yongle emperor with few public qualms of conscience. For every Lian Zining from Jiangxi there were many others from Jiangxi like Hanlin academician Yang Rong (1371–1440), who greeted the Prince of Yan when he entered Nanjing and felicitously chose to serve the new ruler. Yang changed his name from Zirong to commemorate the occasion (on this tactic see Chapter 5). Yang Rong had taken his palace degree in 1400 under the Jianwen emperor.⁸⁶ The examiners and 110 graduates of the 1400 palace examination were proof

that most of the Jianwen emperor's officials did not heed the classical injunction held by some later literati that once having served the Jianwen emperor they could not very well serve his murderer (*bu erchen*).⁸⁷

Early Ming Literati Collaborators

Fang Xiaoru was one of the Jianwen emperor's readers for the palace examination of 1400, while the Jiangxi native Xie Jin (1369–1415) was in charge of collecting the candidates' papers. Both were Hanlin academicians. Rather than martyr himself in 1402, Xie Jin, a palace graduate of 1388, chose the path of least resistance. For his loyalty, Zhu Di reappointed Xie to the Hanlin Academy and immediately delegated to him the task of going through the Jianwen emperor's papers and removing anything that might be used to challenge the usurpation. Next, and still in 1402, the Yongle emperor put Xie in charge of the first revision of Zhu Yuanzhang's "Veritable Records," which were altered to confirm Zhu Di as emperor and denigrate the Jianwen emperor as illegitimate. The version of history that Xie helped prepare (there was also a second revision) presented Zhu Di as the eldest surviving son of Zhu Yuanzhang. Zhu Di should have been designated the heir apparent in 1392 when his older brother died. As a result of unscrupulous advisers who later served the Jianwen emperor, the unqualified "imperial grandson" instead became the heir.⁸⁸

Hu Guang (1370–1418) was selected as *optimus* for the 1400 palace examination. Like Lian Zining, Hu was one of the Jiangxi elite prominent in the Jianwen emperor's court. The Jianwen emperor had Hu change his name before he entered the Hanlin Academy because the original was the same name as that of a Han dynasty official.⁸⁹ Another Jiangxi native who took his palace degree in 1400 was Jin Youzi (1368–1431).⁹⁰ Jin was Lian Zining's townsman. Both grew up together and studied Confucius's *Springs and Autumns* as young men in preparation for the civil examinations.⁹¹ After 1402 both Hu Guang and Jin Youzi served the Yongle emperor. They saw collaboration with the Jianwen emperor's conquering uncle as a way to strike a public peace with a ruler in vital need of literati support.

By conceding some moral high ground to his officials, Zhu Di overcame Jiangxi regional opposition from Lian's cohorts. Hu immediately

changed his name back to Guang. Changing names perhaps mitigated the moral dilemmas men faced.⁹² Reappointed by Zhu Di as a Hanlin academician, he was later in 1414 placed in charge of the *Great Collection* [of commentaries] for the Five Classics and Four Books (*Wujing Sishu daquan*) project that the Yongle emperor authorized to augment the “Way learning” orthodoxy required in civil examinations. Jin Youzi joined Hu Guang and Yang Rong on this influential cultural project.⁹³

In addition to changes in the “Veritable Records of the Hongwu Reign,” Zhu Di also instructed Xie Jin in 1404 to employ some 147 scholars to bring together all extant classical, literary, and historical writings in a single collection, which when completed in 1404 the emperor named the *Great Collection of Documents* (*Wenxian dacheng*). This project picked up from similar projects initiated during earlier dynasties. During Zhu Yuanzhang’s reign, for example, Xie Jin had in 1388 suggested to the Hongwu emperor that he authorize a compilation of essential “Way learning” writings on the Classics. Previously in 1373–1374, Zhu had already indicated his interest in copying Tang rulers in compiling definitive records of classical learning and ancient institutional works. A work was prepared to explicate the Four Books and Five Classics.⁹⁴

The haste with which the *Great Collection of Documents* was undertaken, so soon after the usurpation, and the fact that Xie Jin, who had just completed an initial whitewashing of the Hongwu “Veritable Records,” was chosen to collect and edit the materials suggests that Zhu Di had political as well as cultural motives in mind when he ordered Xie to start collecting documents dealing with all of classical learning.⁹⁵ In addition to collecting documents, the compilers could ferret out materials damaging to Zhu Di’s imperial legitimacy. The final compilation had its darker side, political shadows that would reach deep into the eighteenth century, when the Qianlong emperor, who well understood Zhu Di’s motives and knew the records of the Yongle reign very well, authorized in the 1770s and 1780s the voluminous *Complete Collection of the Four Treasuries* (*Siku quanshu*) project in part to ferret out anti-Manchu writings.⁹⁶

Zhu Di was unhappy with the *Great Collection of Documents* when it was completed in 1404.⁹⁷ In 1405, he instructed his closest confidant, Yao Guangxiao (1335–1418), a Buddhist cleric, to advance the project

further. A staff of 2,169 compilers, among whom were included Buddhists and medical specialists, was placed at Yao's disposal to comb through all known works and copy them for the project. A Buddhist monk critical of "Way learning," Yao had encouraged Zhu Di to revolt against the Jianwen emperor and remained one of the emperor's closest advisers. After completing this encyclopedic project in 1407, which was known as the *Great Compendium of the Yongle Era* (*Yongle dadian*), Yao was put in charge of a second revision of Hongwu's "Veritable Records" that lasted from 1411 to 1418. All copies of the first revision by Xie Jin, like copies of the original completed earlier, were eradicated, leaving only Yao's second revision.⁹⁸

There were 472 graduates on the 1404 metropolitan civil examination, the first under the Yongle emperor. This was the highest number since 1385, when Zhu Yuanzhang had needed to fill his badly depleted bureaucracy. Similarly, the sudden increase in palace degrees reflected the emperor's need to reproduce, immediately, literati loyal to him. When asked by examiners what quota to set in 1404, the emperor replied that he wanted to set it initially to its highest level to date but that this quota should not be continued.⁹⁹ After the palace examination, the emperor ordered that all candidates who had failed the metropolitan examination be reexamined in a special literary examination. In this way, another sixty loyal students were chosen to enter the Imperial School to prepare for the next metropolitan examination.¹⁰⁰

In 1406, 25 percent of the palace degrees came from Jiangxi, Lian Zining's home province; in 1411 this increased to 32 percent.¹⁰¹ Jiangxi literati such as Xie Jin were promoted to the rank of Grand Secretary,¹⁰² confirming that loyalty to the new emperor, particularly among the Jiangxi elite, was quickly rewarded. In one account of Zhu Di's meeting with his seven top advisers, most of whom were from Jiangxi (including Xie, Hu Guang, Yang Rong, and Jin Youzi), he praised them all for their support since he took power in 1402. Throughout the Yongle reign, Jiangxi natives took 25–30 percent of the triennial palace degrees, a figure that diminished only in the early sixteenth century.¹⁰³

Zhu Di's *Method of the Mind in the Sages' Teachings*, completed with the help of his Hanlin academicians in 1409 and presented to the heir (the future Hongxi emperor, r. 1425) for his moral cultivation, preached

the unity of the “legitimate transmission of the Way” and “political legitimacy.”¹⁰⁴ A prelude to the “Way learning” compendium known as the *Great Collection of Works on Nature and Principles (Xingli daquan)*, which was compiled from 1414 to 1415, Zhu Di’s selection of classical commentaries represented reauthorization of “Way learning” as cultural orthodoxy. Citing Zhu Xi and his Song disciples, the emperor demonstrated that he was in complete agreement with Zhu Xi that the “mind of Way,” as the venue for moral principles, should be the master, while the human mind, venue for selfish desires, should take its orders from the former. The emperor, in effect, appropriated Zhu Xi’s commentary to educate his son and his subjects.¹⁰⁵

As a sage-king, Zhu Di had it both ways: he used Cheng-Zhu learning for political legitimacy; at the same time he became the greatest imperial patron to date of Song “Way learning.” His literati supporters could also have it both ways: they used “Way learning” to restore literati influence in the government; simultaneously they saw to it that Cheng-Zhu learning prevailed in official rhetoric.

Zhu Di’s preface to *Method of the Mind in the Sages’ Teachings* had some ambiguous elements. On the loyalty the ruler expected of his officials, he wrote: “Those who receive their positions and salaries from the ruler should concern themselves with the dynasty as they do their families. They should forget about themselves and follow the dynasty.”¹⁰⁶ Lian Zining, Fang Xiaoru, and the Jianwen martyrs had lived up to this ideal, more than Zhu Di’s well-placed collaborators such as Xie Jin or Hu Guang. The emperor did on occasion, as in 1413, wish that Lian Zining had submitted to him. On the other hand, Hu Guang, when he died in 1418, was greatly honored for his service. Earlier, however, Xie Jin, hated by the Yongle emperor’s designated successor, whom Xie had opposed, had been thrown into prison in 1411 on charges of *lesè-majesté*, where he perished in 1415.¹⁰⁷

The “Way Learning” Canon

In addition to revising the historical record, Zhu Di’s regime required educational legitimation to backstop that record. The Yongle emperor wished to “appear as sage ruler, a teacher of his people, and a patron of learning.”¹⁰⁸ These cultural endeavors came to a climax in 1415 by

publication and dissemination of three classical projects: (1) the *Great Collection [of commentaries] for the Four Books*; (2) *Great Collection for the Five Classics (Wujing daquan)*; and (3) *Great Collection on Nature and Principle*. These defined the sources that millions of candidates should use to prepare for the civil examinations in all government schools down to the county level.

The three compendia produced in the Hanlin Academy enshrined “Way learning.” The collections for the Five Classics and Four Books were compiled in great haste. It took only nine months, from 1414 to 1415, for Hu Guang and his staff to prepare and blend the Song and Yuan scholia into coherent passage-by-passage commentaries for the Five Classics and Four Books. The haste with which the commentaries were compiled, perhaps to add cultural luster to the events surrounding the imminent move of the court to Beijing in 1415, elicited later criticism for being incomplete.¹⁰⁹ Because the three collections were compiled by Hanlin academicians who were also employed in revising the “Veritable Records of the Hongwu Reign,” and because they had also helped edit the *Great Compendia of the Yongle Era*, later scholars suspected that the real purpose of the “Great Collections Trilogy” (*Sanbu daquan*) was to eliminate the Jianwen reign from classical learning. Ming-Qing literati such as Gu Yanwu (1613–1682) frequently blamed the Yongle projects for the decline of classical studies:

The ruler [i.e., Zhu Di] lied to the court, and those below [i.e., the bureaucracy] swindled the literati. Was there ever anything like this in Tang or Song times? Did they not compromise honest and upright officials while replacing the Jianwen emperor? Moreover, when the writing of [8-legged] examination essays began, literati all at once discarded the “solid learning” transmitted since the Song and Yuan dynasties. Those above and below were mutually gullible and became fixated on careerist interests, never stopping to ask why. Alas! The demise of classical studies in reality began from this.¹¹⁰

Other Qing scholars also frequently blamed the Yongle projects and their pervasive examination influence for the decline of classical studies

during the Ming dynasty. The Qing compilers of the *Ming History* had similar complaints.¹¹¹

Zhu Di himself prepared a preface when the last of the trilogy, the *Great Collection on Nature and Principle*, was completed and all three works were officially authorized for printing. Chu wrote in 1415 that upon succeeding to the throne, all sage-kings had “used the Way to order the world.” Hence, he himself, “as successor to the illustrious foundations of the great emperor, the Paramount Ancestor” (Zhu Yuanzhang), had ordered his Hanlin academicians to prepare the three works “to include whatever had clarified the meaning of the Classics and to exclude whatever was contrary to the meaning of the Classics.”¹¹² In their own statement, Hu Guang and the compilers (including Yang Rong and Jin Youzi from Jiangxi) echoed Zhu Di’s pretense that the Jianwen emperor had never existed and that Zhu was the legitimate successor by praising him in no uncertain terms: “Never before has there been a ruler of such great action, who has been able to clarify the Way of the Six Classics and continue the unity of our previous sages like this.”¹¹³

The *Great Collection on Nature and Principle* represented the clearest statement of curricular support for Song-Ming “Way learning.” It was required for the duration of the Ming and Qing dynasties for almost 500 years and included a full and unexpurgated version of the *Mencius*, Zhu Di having nothing to fear from legitimation of regicide.¹¹⁴ Because of this concession, the collections represented the changing political circumstances within which the Five Classics and Four Books were studied and interpreted. As a textual monument, the “Great Collections Trilogy” transcended its historical context and became a record of the post-Zhu Xi commentary tradition, which surpassed Han-Tang scholia for eminence of place until the eighteenth century (see Chapter 7).¹¹⁵

The Ming government saw to it that these editions of the “Way learning” canon were placed in schools empire-wide. No such definitive collection had existed empire-wide during the Song or Yuan dynasties. Han-Tang commentaries were dropped as discrete works and were only selectively cited in the Song and Yuan commentaries chosen for inclusion in the “Trilogy” projects. Ming Hanlin academicians overdetermined, for example, the rigorous moralism that derived from the Cheng-Zhu bifurcation of heavenly principles from human desires. They were

later accused by Qing dynasty scholars of presenting a Buddhist vision of good versus evil, which was more formalistic than the more nuanced dualism that Zhu Xi had enunciated to refute the Buddhists.¹¹⁶

When they chose commentaries on the text of the *Mencius*, for example, the Hanlin scholars working on the *Great Collection of the Four Books*, selected notes that set limits to Mencius's discussion of the legitimate grounds for officials and the people to oppose an evil ruler. For the passages in the *Mencius* that had enraged the Hongwu emperor but were tolerated by Zhu Di, Hu Guang chose commentators who stressed that Mencius's words applied only to the chaotic historical situation of the Warring States period (476/453–221 BCE). Accordingly, Mencius stood as a guide to the past and not as a critique of the present. His criticism of ancient tyrants could not be translated into a precedent for the enlightened age of the Ming.¹¹⁷

The Yongle emperor's legitimacy and his dynasty's sovereignty, despite the important concessions made to Mencian political theory, were still based on imperial power demonstrated by force of arms. If literati dissented, their forms of dissent were politically circumscribed. High moral ground had been granted the ruler, even one who had fought a civil war to take power, while the throne and officials together determined the acceptable limits of Mencius's theories. By restoring the complete and unexpurgated version of the *Mencius*, the Yongle emperor disclaimed his direct authority over the interpretation of any classic. Some late-Ming literati eventually challenged the court's view of imperial power at the same time that they rehabilitated the historical record of the Jianwen emperor, Fang Xiaoru, and Lian Zining.¹¹⁸

Moral remonstrance as a form of political dissent, exemplified best in the careers of Lian and Fang, served to measure Ming rulers according to universal classical standards of "Way learning." During the Ming and Qing, however, rulers frequently closed this avenue of dissent or diverted it into a form of bureaucratic surveillance.¹¹⁹ Although the complete *Mencius* was rehabilitated in 1415, the passages that had troubled Zhu Yuanzhang in 1372 were almost never chosen by examiners for essay topics in provincial or metropolitan civil examinations. For an interesting exception, which confirmed the rule, we should note that the famous

quotation “The people should be valued most” (*min wei gui*) from the *Mencius*, was chosen by examiners for the 1624 Jiangxi provincial examination to express their dissatisfaction with eunuch power.¹²⁰ The answer by Ai Nanying (1583–1646) was highly prized (see Chapter 7), but because his remarks were said to be critical of a powerful eunuch at court, Ai was barred from metropolitan examinations for nine years. Never a palace degree-holder, Ai became a model essay writer and a leading voice among late-Ming literati who reassessed the legitimacy of the early Ming in light of the tragic events of 1402.¹²¹

In uncensored form (a major concession by Zhu Di to his officials), *Mencius* was allowed to speak to his readers, most of whom were candidates for the examinations. A sage-king, Zhu Di was the beneficiary of all that the classical canon could offer. Even its dissenting portions turned in his favor, as long as he restored a working relationship with his literati elites and heeded their moral values.

The Yongle Legacy

After 1425, the civil examinations became the principal means for filling higher offices in the bureaucracy. Only on the 1385 and 1404 metropolitan examinations had early Ming civil examinations approached in scope and magnitude Song civil service appointments to the bureaucracy via examinations. Accordingly, although “Way learning” was ritually honored by the Southern Song court in 1241 and had become the civil examination canon under the Yuan in 1313, these were preliminary steps. It was in Ming cultural and political life that for the first time the government fully put “Way learning” into practice empire-wide as imperial ideology. Ming civil examinations thereafter guaranteed that the dynastic curriculum established in 1415 based on “Way learning” and the “Complete Collection Trilogy” would be studied and mastered by millions upon millions of civil examination candidates for half a millennium.

Some Qing literati naively believed early Ming emperors to be enviable stalwarts of the canon.¹²² But the triumph of “Way learning” as imperial ideology during the early Ming was achieved at a price. The linkage

between autocratic power and Cheng-Zhu philosophic discourse was consummated in a bittersweet accommodation between perhaps the most powerful emperor in Chinese history, Zhu Di, and officials who championed “Way learning” moral ideals of personal self-cultivation. Hypocrisy was inevitable. Ming literati were fortunate to never again face charismatic “sage-kings” like the Hongwu emperor Zhu Yuanzhang or his son, the Yongle emperor.

The memory of Zhu Di’s usurpation weighed on the conscience of the Ming. A Jiangxi literatus, Wu Yubi (1392–1469), refused to participate in the civil examinations because he was unwilling to serve the Yongle emperor, whom he regarded as a usurper. This act alienated him from his father, Wu Pu (1363–1426), who had passed the Jianwen-era 1400 metropolitan examination ranked first and had by 1403 under Yongle become involved in revising and reissuing the “Veritable Records of the Hongwu Reign” (for which Zhu Di quickly promoted him). Wu Pu then served as a deputy chief compiler for Yongle’s *Great Compendium*. Wu Yubi’s personal integrity influenced his Jiangxi disciple, Hu Juren (1434–1484), who also refused to take Ming civil examinations even though the Yongle emperor was long dead. Hu appealed indirectly in his writings to the Mencian injunction against political usurpation. Both Wu and Hu became model “Way learning” scholars and were honored for their integrity and moral cultivation.¹²³

The fates of Lian Zining and Fang Xiaoru remained unacknowledged in the official records and their question “Where is King Cheng?” still unanswered. Zhu Di relented in his persecution of the martyrs’ families in 1416, when he learned from Hu Guang, who had just returned from a trip to Jiangxi to attend his mother’s funeral, that the people were finally pacified.¹²⁴ Pardons were granted in succeeding reigns for surviving family members of the executed officials. In 1425, for example, the Hongxi emperor rehabilitated thousands of Fang Xiaoru’s Zhejiang descendants.¹²⁵ The next year, the Xuande emperor (r. 1426–1435) pardoned Lian Zining’s surviving Jiangxi kin.¹²⁶ In 1573 all the martyrs were pardoned.¹²⁷

Late imperial ideology and civil examination orthodoxy domesticated “Way learning” using interconnected political, moral, and institu-

tional threads, which were woven together into their late imperial form by the Yongle emperor and his literati collaborators. Even if Emperor Wu (r. 140–87 BCE) of the Han, Taizong (r. 627–649) of the Tang, and Taizu of the Song (r. 960–976) were his historical predecessors in such imperial endeavors, and even if Emperor Lizong (r. 1225–1264) during the Southern Song and Renzong (r. 1312–1320) during the Yuan had already placed “Way learning” on the imperial pedestals of first ritual and then civil examination orthodoxy, Zhu Di and his regime left a vaster legacy for the Ming and Qing dynasties. The imperial dynasty and its “Way learning” orthodoxy that collapsed in the late nineteenth century drew its historical lineage directly from the early Ming.

When the Kangxi emperor (r. 1662–1722) ordered Hanlin scholars to compile the “Way learning” tract entitled *Essentials of Works on Nature and Principles* (*Xingli jingyi*, issued in 1715) and the *Synthesis of Books and Illustrations Past and Present* (*Gujin tushu jicheng*) encyclopedia (revised and printed in 1728 under the Yongzheng emperor, r. 1723–1735), the court took a page out of the Yongle reign to present the Manchu ruler as a “Way learning” sage-king working in partnership with his elites. The Qianlong emperor and his court did the same when they ordered the compilation of the greatest bibliographic project in Chinese history in 1773, the “Complete Collection of the Imperial Library,” which monitored for anti-Manchu writings and thereby controlled, like its predecessor the *Great Compendium of the Yongle Era*, the official version of acceptable knowledge.

Earlier, the Kangxi emperor’s 1673 “Preface” to the reissue of the Ming version of the *Great Collection of Works on Nature and Principles* linked early Qing political legitimacy (*zhitong*) to the “Way learning” cultural policies of the Hongwu and Yongle emperors and based that legitimacy on the “method of the mind” (*xinfa*) transferred from the early sage-kings to their Qing peers. The Manchu rulers also reappropriated the Way as receivers of cultural legitimacy (*daotong*).¹²⁸ Ming and Qing emperors and their ministers appealed to the Way of the sage-kings, which since antiquity was the model for contemporary governance. They claimed, moreover, that the moral principles of antiquity had been transmitted, mind to mind, from the sage-kings to the present emperor

via Cheng-Zhu teachings. Thereafter, emperors, mandarins, and “Way learning” shared such affinities with each other.

Viewed in isolation, the Ming-Qing “Way learning” curriculum is often perceived as a cultural field of philosophical and historical discourse tied simply to the *Four Books*, *Five Classics*, and *Dynastic Histories*. That cultural field was championed by local literati, to be sure, but the examination life, its rituals of preparation, and stages of success were also connected to the complex and interrelated processes of political, social, economic, and cultural reproduction, which had their start during the Song dynasties.¹²⁹ Functioning as social and political litmus tests, licensing examinations, as we will see in the next chapter, stood as a purposive barrier sealing in at best semiliterate masses from fully classically literate elites who were full partners in maintaining the imperial system.

What was unique about this Ming government effort to expand Song-Yuan dynasty institutions for political efficacy was its remarkable success in accomplishing the goals for which it was designed. Seen in terms of its own essential functions, the civil service recruitment process embodied the complex relations between social status, political power, and cultural prestige for five centuries. More often than not, examinations in late imperial China were simply recognized for what they were, one of several tools in the repertoire of the government to maintain public order and political efficacy. From the point of view of the dynasty, reproduction of well-trained and loyal literati officials remained the prime concern. Imperial support of education and examinations was contingent on the success of the examination process in supplying talented and loyal men for the empire to employ. Conversely, the legions of “examination failures” produced by the system since Song times unleashed an unprecedented wave of successful alternate careers for the classically literate beyond state control.

Because elite education became closely identified with the dynasty’s primary goal of selection, it misses the point to evaluate the examination system, as so many contemporaries have, solely according to its economic or scientific sterility. Nor can we simply assume that the selection

process served imperial interests alone. Chinese elites were able to gain some social and cultural recognition and autonomy through the selection process because the emperor and his court—even Hongwu and Yongle—had to cooperate with metropolitan and provincial officials to maintain the intellectual and moral terms of the selection process.

The social habits, political interests, and moral values inherited by officials since the Yuan and Ming dynasties were officially reproduced (with much unofficial and official dissent) through a system of dynastic schooling and civil examinations that took their mature form during the early fifteenth century and lasted until 1905. In the next chapter, we will explore further the social, cultural, and linguistic dimensions empire-wide of this remarkable political machinery for promoting classical literacy and enforcing mastery of “Way learning.”

Ming to Qing: “Way Learning” Standards and the 8-Legged Essay

PUBLIC CEREMONIES HONORING emperors as imperial teachers accompanied the testing and selection of candidates for public office. Once they were cut down to literati size, both the Hongwu and Yongle emperors accorded graduates with both sociopolitical status and cultural prestige. Thereafter, classical literacy, the mastery of “Way learning,” and the ability to write terse but elegant examination essays publicly identified the literati on the final lists of graduates. The civil service competition successfully created a dynastic curriculum which consolidated gentry, military, and merchant families empire-wide into a culturally defined status group of degree-holders sharing a common classical language and memorization of a mutual canon.

The literary culture that was in part defined by the examination curriculum also influenced the literatus’s definition of his character and conscience. The content of the memorization leading up to the examinations reinforced the overlap of bureaucratic government and the individual’s role as an elite servant of the dynasty. The literatus’s moral cultivation was the court’s perennial concern. It sought to ensure that the officials it chose would serve the people in the name of the ruling family. As the highest social group, literati were partners of the dynasty and models for those beneath them politically and socially. For the literatus, it was important that the dynasty conformed to classical ideals and up-

held the “Way learning” orthodoxy formulated during the Song-Yuan-Ming transition. State authorization of “Way learning” was also about the cultural transformation of the literatus into a political servant of the people and the ruler.

Language, Classicism, and Calligraphy

Classical Chinese was an empowering language in political selection. The moral meaning and philosophical significance of “Way learning” required discussion of the social value and political power of imperial orthodoxy by officialdom. By bringing language into the discussion, we can analyze an authorized classical language as an instrument of social and political policy, which also functioned as the lingua franca of classically educated literati.¹ Because of the absence of public schools before 1898, most male commoners (particularly rural peasants, artisans, and traders) were linguistically, and thus culturally, excluded from the examination market. Unequal distribution of educational resources meant that those from families with limited traditions of literacy were unlikely to compete successfully in the degree market with those whose family traditions included classical literacy. The civil examinations remained exclusive by choosing from members of the local elite and confirming their status.²

Despite such elitism, filial piety and ancestor worship transcended class and cultural barriers. Even the *Thousand Character Text*, *Hundred Surnames*, and *Three Character Classic* primers, which almost all families and local schools used to train children to read and write the 1,500 different characters needed for functional literacy, were encoded with classical values that the society upheld. Popular literacy in spoken Chinese was prevalent among nonelites,³ but such cultural levels were not as politically empowering as classical literacy. Since the early and middle empires in China, the linguistic registers differentiating vernaculars, semiclassical, and classical Chinese ensured that fully classically literate scholar-officials were entering a world of written discourse in which few in local society could participate. Such language registers thus suggested a sense of hierarchy.⁴

Unlike the Latin versus spoken vernaculars divide that demarcated secondary from primary education in early modern Europe,⁵ the spoken

(Mandarin) and written (classical) languages of late imperial China were different in that the classical language was an elite discipline while everyone shared in a vernacular dialect. Students memorized somewhere in the range of 400,000 repeating characters formed into words from the Four Books and Five Classics. This count does not include the voluminous Dynastic Histories (by the Song there were seventeen, by the Qing twenty-two “legitimate” dynasties).

After 1415, the dominant values, ideas, questions, and debates that prevailed in court and among officials were translated into a classical language whose pronunciation was loosely based on the standard Mandarin dialect of the court (*guanhua*) in the Beijing capital region in north China and not on the dialects of the more populous and prosperous South. A form of “southern” Mandarin remained in use during the Ming in the parallel ministries that were maintained in Nanjing as the southern capital. After 1425, China was divided into geographical units linked to linguistic divisions to try to limit the economic advantages of the South. The official languages under the Ming, known as “northern” and “southern” Mandarin, required written and spoken forms that privileged outsiders, who through education and social contacts could grasp the language only after years of training. Even under the Qing, when the state added Manchu and Mongolian as the official languages of warrior elites, the classical language of literati remained the public voice of the bureaucracy. Without a competing capital such as Nanking, Beijing during the Qing dynasty provided the standard language for officials.⁶

Such policies condemned those who traveled little, spoke only local or regional dialects outside the capital, or were just “primer-literate” to classical illiteracy. They might become scribes, woodblock carvers, and even writers of local legal complaints, but as non-degree-holding primer-literates they were ineligible to enter the civil examination compounds where the political elite was chosen from the social elite.⁷ To acquire the legitimate cultural training necessary to qualify for the civil service, most students preparing for the examinations (especially those in the South) mastered a new spoken dialect (northern or southern Mandarin) as a second language and a written language (classical Chinese) whose terseness, unusual written graphs, and archaic forms required constant attention until adulthood.⁸

The “Way learning” required for political success reproduced a shared spoken and written language for officialdom in the dual capitals of the Ming. Southern Chinese, whose native dialects differed from the official Mandarin during the Qing, overcame their initial linguistic disadvantages through the translation of their greater wealth into wider social contacts and superior educational resources and facilities but at the price of identifying with broader, empire-wide elites. Gentry, military, and merchant families from all over the empire had more in common culturally and linguistically with each other than they did with lower social groups in their native areas, who remained tied to local traditions, temples, and dialects. Elites circulated in local, provincial, and capital circles, while nonelites were limited to local groups that spoke the same dialect and shared the same traditions. Preparation for the civil service entailed mastery of orthodox and regionalized schemes of classical language, thought, perception, appreciation, and action associated in class and individual terms with both literati culture and the literatus as a “man of culture” (*wenren*).

Cantonese literati from southeast China shared decisive linguistic (Mandarin) and discursive (classical) commonalities with literati all over the empire. In unforeseen ways, the institutionalization of the Mandarin dialect in Beijing after 1415–1421 as the official spoken language and the requirement that ancient classical texts be included in the civil examinations generated cleavages between classically literate, Mandarin-speaking elites, who served as “outsider” officials in counties, townships, prefectures, and provinces, and the nonelite, sometimes semiliterate, natives of these regions who spoke a different dialect. Gentry and merchants were conceptually operating in diverse although often overlapping linguistic traditions, one local, rich in nonofficial culture and lineage traditions, and one empire-wide, embodying the written classical language and the official tongue of political power. A literatus from Shanxi in the Northwest could bridge the vernacular gap with his southeastern Cantonese colleague, even if communication occurred only in written form using a brush (*bihua*).⁹

The civil examinations aimed for a degree of cultural and linguistic uniformity that only a classical education could provide. But this goal was never fully achieved. Linguistic uniformities permitted a wide

range of regional textual traditions and local scholarly traditions.¹⁰ The classical curriculum chosen by the literati for the civil service represented a set of linguistic signs (over 400,000 repeating graphs), stylistic categories (8-legged essay rhetorical forms), and moral concepts (“Way learning” theory). This overlap ensured that political power and social status would be defined in terms acceptable to the government and shared with its literati. For good or bad, unintentionally or not, Song “Way learning” established the guidelines for politically and culturally legitimating the dynasty and augmenting the social prestige of the dominant status group. Despite the political terror during the Hongwu and Yongle reigns, Ming literati remained full participants in the cultural construction of the classical canon. Because they remained involved in its operation, the civil examinations had political and social support.

Proficiency in spoken Mandarin and classical literacy was a vital element for elite kinship strategies, as was “primer-literacy” for many other commoners. Compilation of genealogies, preparation of deeds or legal complaints, and settlements for adoption contracts and mortgages required linguistic expertise and political contacts that only the elite within a kinship group could provide. A classical education was a seal of cultural approval. Somewhat like European elites in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries who crossed over from their spoken language to classical Latin as the language of instruction in secondary education, most Ming and Qing Chinese, Manchus, and Mongols subordinated their native tongues in favor of Mandarin and classical Chinese if they entered the examination halls.¹¹

Merchants, like gentry families, became cultured patrons of classical scholarship. Such merchants were barely distinguishable from the gentry elite, although Ming hereditary designations as “merchant families” remained in use if not in practice. In the Yangzi delta, for instance, merchants supplied resources for establishing local schools and private academies.¹² Merchant success in local society, particularly in urban centers, revealed the correlation between profits from trade and high social status. Classical scholarship flourished due to merchant patronage, and books were printed and collected in larger numbers than ever before.¹³

During the Ming and Qing, elite literary culture was further cemented through strict enforcement of requirements that all candidates must compose essays in what eventually became a rigid parallel-prose style called “8-legged essays,” a genre infamous among examination candidates and baffling for “primer-literate” merchants, peasants, and artisans.¹⁴ To these cultural expectations were added the gentlemanly requirements that candidates be adept in the art of calligraphy, one of the most characteristic forms of cultural training to master written classical Chinese. The rituals for properly writing Chinese graphs, learned from childhood as students traced the characters in their primers over and over again, included cultural paraphernalia long associated with literati culture: the writing brush, ink stick, ink slab, stone monuments, fine silk, and special paper (see Figure 2.1). The brush, ink, inkstone, and paper were known as the “four treasures of the scholar’s studio.” Chinese high culture demanded both mastery of literary forms and artistic training to write those forms beautifully.¹⁵

State examinations required acceptably written “regular” calligraphy (*kaishu*) on special paper free of smudges or cut-and-paste graphs. In local examinations, the students’ papers were not anonymous, and the county, township, and prefectural examiners evaluated a candidate’s penmanship as well as his essays. Similarly, calligraphy was an important element in the final ranking of palace graduates, where there were no copyists. This procedure continued for those who entered the Hanlin Academy, where literary examinations for compilers were regularly held.¹⁶ Students prepared acceptable answers using the officially recognized “regular” script, but the man of culture also mastered “cursive” (*caoshu*), “running” (*xingshu*), and even ancient “seal” (*zhuan**shu*) forms of writing. Seal and cursive script were intelligible to only the most erudite. At the higher levels, the rituals that accompanied the reading and writing of classical Chinese made such aesthetic skills seem even more mystical.¹⁷

An “amateur” literati ideal (and an “ideal” is all it was), which equated classical, literary, and calligraphic forms of cultural expression with social status, did take rhetorical precedence among elites, particularly when young men were students and had not yet held public office.¹⁸ This much-heralded ideal of the “gentleman” and his literary and aesthetic



Figure 2.1. Writing paraphernalia of the 1388 *optimus*. *Ming zhuangyuan tukao* [Illustrated survey of *optimi* during the Ming dynasty]. Compiled by Gu Dingchen and Gu Zuxun. 1607 edition.

sensibilities precluded somewhat nonelite participation in the ways of conspicuous leisure (painting, calligraphy, poetry, etc.) as defined in higher culture.

Although legal, medical, institutional, and fiscal specialties were tested as policy questions on Ming civil examinations, the end of most specialty examinations in the civil service selection process after the Southern Song marked the imperial withdrawal of social and political prestige from technical subjects.¹⁹ This did not automatically doom these technical fields to oblivion, but thereafter training in law, medicine, astronomy, and fiscal affairs frequently became the preserve of commoner clerks, yamen secretaries, official aides, and even Muslims and Europeans, who staffed the technically oriented yamens of the Ming-Qing bureaucracy. Only when faced with alien rule, first under the Mongols and then under the Manchus in the seventeenth century, did significant numbers of literati turn again to occupations outside the civil service.²⁰

During the Ming, cultural reproduction conveniently supported the political aims of the government, although such reproduction was monopolized by social elites. Rote memorization in Mandarin pronunciation of the Four Books and one of the Five Classics (before 1787) by examination candidates was constantly deplored but never resolved. As in early modern Europe, where stress on order and conformity ensured that rote learning (e.g., the catechism) played a fundamental role in the educational process,²¹ late imperial Chinese educators prized the rote reception of orthodoxy. Civil examinations were a fundamental factor, among many others, in influencing cultural consensus and conditioning forms of reasoning and rhetoric.²²

The 8-Legged Essay and Literary Formalism after 1475

Whatever the literary verdict, similar to the now anachronistic claim by Japanese art historians circa 1900 that late imperial Chinese painting was “decadent,”²³ the late imperial examination essay had its most immediate roots in the transition from Tang-Song belles lettres to the classical essay championed by Wang Anshi (1021–1086) in the eleventh century. The classical essay, however, was not firmly in place in civil

examinations as the key literary form empire-wide until the early Ming. The 8-legged essay was still the rage as late as 1800, and there were many efforts to valorize its literary pedigree.

Most Ming-Qing literati traced the essay form back to the 1057–1071 Northern Song debates for and against replacing poetry and rhyme-prose on civil examinations with essays. Others thought the selection of quotations for an essay was indirectly derived from Tang times, when candidates had to recite a classical passage from memory after seeing only one phrase. Still others attributed the style to the *dramatis persona* in Jin and Yuan dynasty theatrical writings.²⁴ However, the history of the examination essay is more complicated and has several other sources: (1) the policy essay used in ancient times, (2) the parallel prose of medieval essays, and (3) the ancient prose styles of the Northern Song. While it was still fashionable to do so, champions of both parallel- and ancient-style prose each claimed the 8-legged essay as a kindred genre to legitimate literary traditions. The “legs” (*gu*, lit., “bones”) of the examination essay refer back to both parallel- and ancient-style prose genres.

Qing classical scholars claimed that the “contemporary-style essay” in its 8-legged form derived from medieval parallel prose styles requiring balanced phrases and arguments in a series of four and six characters. To gainsay this position, among those who favored “Way learning,” one of them, Fang Bao (1668–1749), compiled the *Imperially Authorized Essays on the Four Books* (*Qinding sishu wen*) for the Qianlong emperor and linked the 8-legged essay to ancient-style prose and “Way learning.”²⁵ The 8-legged style formally appeared for the first time during the Ming Chenghua reign (1465–1487). Consequently, the tendency to construct the historical genealogy of the 8-legged essay backward to the Han, Tang, or Song dynasties elides its sudden presence in the 1480s. Although the 8-legged form has roots in earlier dynasties, I first focus on its mid-Ming appearance before trying to unravel its cultural significance among literati writers. As in earlier such cases, it was the literati, and not the imperial court, that initially produced this new trend in classical writing.

Detractors of the 8-legged essay received a sympathetic hearing from the beginning, but a broad spectrum since 1500 also served as its advocates. Li Zhi, a late Ming iconoclast on most issues,²⁶ saw in the 8-legged essay the

ongoing literati search for ancient values. The contemporary-style essay, for Li, had proven its worth in producing famous officials.²⁷ Similarly, Yuan Hongdao (1568–1610) and Li Yu (1611–1680), known for their unconventional literary traditions, regarded 8-legged essays as mirrors of contemporary literature. For them, the essay transcended its requirement as a formal exercise and had become an important literary genre in its own right. Such essays became a cultural form used by classically literate men, young and old, inside and outside the examination compound.²⁸

The Hanlin academician Liang Zhangju (1775–1849) prepared an early nineteenth-century work entitled *Collected Comments on the Crafting of 8-Legged Civil Examination Essays* (*Zhiyi conghua*). He mentioned the accruing flaws in the selection process, but he praised the artistic and cultural levels the examination essays fostered in Chinese life. Liang noted that no one to date had come up with an acceptable alternative.²⁹ Qing literati who prepared prefaces for Liang's work, which placed the examination essay in full cultural relief, wrote in praise of Qing contributions to its further evolution.³⁰

Mid-Ming Origins of the 8-Legged Essay

Despite significant continuities between Song and Ming dynasty examination essay styles, some early Qing scholars claimed that the 8-legged essay took its final form in the early Ming. The *Ming History* (*Ming-shih*) authors dated the newly “crafted essays” (*zhiyi*) to the early Ming Hongwu reign.³¹ Writing in the late seventeenth century, Gu Yanwu dated the 8-legged essay with more historical precision to the late fifteenth century:

The popular tradition of calling classical essays “8-legged” probably began from the Chenghua emperor's reign (1465–1488). The term “leg” (*gu*) is the term for “parallel wording.” Before the Tianshun emperor's reign (1457–1465), writing in the classical essay was nothing more than an extension of classical scholia. They were sometimes parallel, sometimes varied, but without any fixed form. . . . Since the Jiajing emperor's reign (1522–1567), the essay style has continually changed, and if you ask a candidate, none of them know why such essays are called “8-legged.”³²

What is interesting about Gu Yanwu's account is his dating of the first 8-legged essay in the Chenghua reign and his failure to attribute the form to any particular writer.

The most renowned early composer of 8-legged essays was the scholar-official Wang Ao (1450–1524), who passed the Yingtian provincial examination ranked number one in 1474.³³ Wang then passed the 1477 metropolitan examination also ranked number one.³⁴ In the palace examination, however, Wang had the misfortune of having as his chief reader Shang Lu (1414–1486), who was to that point the only Ming literatus who had achieved “three firsts” on the Ming civil examinations (see Chapter 5). He made sure that Wang would not be the second by ranking his final policy answer third overall, after others had initially ranked it first.³⁵ Shang was able to identify Wang's paper because the palace examination, unlike the provincial and metropolitan examinations, was not graded anonymously. Xie Qian (1450–1531), who had also finished first on the 1474 Zhejiang provincial examination, Shang Lu's home province, was chosen the 1475 *optimus* with two firsts.³⁶

Despite this down classing, Wang Ao's classical essays won the day outside the examination compound and beyond the reach of the Hanlin Academy. It was said that “in terms of essays, victory was conceded Wang Ao; in terms of appearances, victory was conceded Xie Qian.” Although Shang Lu tampered with the official rankings out of jealousy, Xie's writings never measured up to Wang's, whose unique style began the evolution of the genre that would become the 8-legged essay.³⁷ Wang Yangming admired Wang Ao's essay on “the nature of things” (*xing*), which was based on Ao's metropolitan policy answer, selected as the best essay for the second metropolitan policy question in 1475. Wang Yangming's biography for Wang Ao noted that the Nanjing provincial examiners were astonished at Ao's 1474 provincial examination essays, which they compared to the great Song litterateur Su Shi. The provincial examiners recorded Ao's discourse and policy essays verbatim in the final report, not daring to change a single character.³⁸

Moreover, Wang Ao, unlike Shang Lu, who retired in 1477, frequently served as a metropolitan examiner in the late fifteenth century, providing occasions on which his classical essays served as models for thousands of candidates in the compounds he supervised. Wang Ao

was an associate examiner for the 1487 metropolitan test (with 4,000 candidates) and one of the two chief examiners for the 1496 metropolitan examinations. Gu Yanwu contended that the 8-legged model was first used to rank essays in these two examinations. In 1490, Wang Ao was also an associate metropolitan examiner, and he was appointed chief metropolitan examiner again in 1508.³⁹ On the 1759 Henan provincial examination, the third policy question on examination essays pointedly asked whether Wang Ao's essays were the forerunners of the 8-legged essay.⁴⁰

The first glimpse we have of the early 8-legged form before its explicit declaration as the official style in 1487 is Wang Ao's 1475 essay on a passage from the *Mencius*: "The Duke of Chou subjugated the northern and southern barbarians, drove away wild animals, and brought security to the people."⁴¹ In that metropolitan examination, Wang's classical essays on two of the three quotations from the *Poetry Classic*, his memorial (*biao*), and two of his policy answers were also singled out by the examiners for their superior literary style and substantive excellence. Qiu Jun (1420–1495), one of the chief examiners and a distinguished Hanlin academician, described Wang Ao's essay on the *Mencius* as "profoundly crafted." Wang's session three policy essays were also praised for their "basis in reliable learning" (*yu kaoju*), a precocious examiner comment about the later rise of evidential research (see Chapter 7).⁴²

Wang Ao's 8-legged essay below, which was cited in Qing collections as a model for the form, is based on a passage in the *Analects*: "When the people have enough, how can the ruler alone have too little?" The essay deals with the ruler's responsibilities to provide a livelihood for his people.⁴³ All of Wang's essays were copied, printed, and studied by generations of civil examination candidates. I present them as balanced clauses below:⁴⁴

[1. Break open the topic (*poti*):]

When the people below are prosperous, the ruler above will be prosperous.

[2. Receiving the topic (*chengti*):]

The wealth of the ruler is stored among the people. If the people are prosperous, why should the ruler alone be poor?

[3. Beginning discussion (*qijiang*):]

In giving advice to Duke Ai, You Ruo profoundly said that the people and the ruler were one.⁴⁵ He implied that the Duke had increased taxation because he lacked resources. To ensure his resources, the Duke should have first satisfied his people.

[4. Initial leg (*qigu*):]

If one can honestly

tithe one hundred *mou* with a frugal mind and love for the people,
and

the one-tenth tax is not levied so the people provide his livelihood,
then

what the people would produce would not be for tax levies,
what resources they have would not all be for tax collection,
there would be accumulation and surplus in village households,
and no worries in caring for parents or raising children,
there would be abundant grain and millet in the fields,
and no anxiety about nurturing the living or seeing off the dead.

[5. Transition leg (*xugu*):]

If the people have enough, how can the ruler alone be poor?

[6. Middle leg (*zhonggu*):]

I know that

The ruler could have everything if it were stored in village households,

with no need to hoard it in his treasury as his goods.

The ruler could use everything if it were placed in the fields,

with no need to accumulate it in his vaults as his possessions.

With unlimited access, why worry that requests would not be honored?

With unlimited resources, why fret over unpreparedness in an emergency?

[7. Later leg (*hougu*):]

Sacrificial animals and ritual grains would be sufficient for religious offerings; jades and silks would be abundant as gifts for tribute and audiences.

Even if insufficient, the people would supply what they have, so what shortage would there be?

Foods and delicacies, beef and drinks would suffice for official guests; carriages and horses, weapons and armor would suffice for wartime.

Even if insufficient, the people would respond with what they have, so what shortage would there be?

[8. Conclusion (*dajie*):]

Oh! Tithing originally was for the benefit of the people, and the dynasty's resources arose in this way. Why should one raise taxes to seek prosperity?

Wang's essay was included in Fang Bao's early Qianlong collection entitled *Imperially Authorized Essays on the Four Books*. Fang said of Wang Ao's piece: "The levels and sequence are refined and clear, moving from the shallow to the profound. When the meaning of the passage is completed, the essay's form also ends. This shows how our predecessors were truthful, concrete, and led the way themselves. Those that came later, although their openings and closings, followings and reflections, were brought to maturity and included ingenious changes, none could carry on the mission."⁴⁶

Cognitive Issues in 8-Legged Essays

Wang Ao wrote his essay with an exaggerated structural commitment to formal parallelism and uses of analogy. The prose exhibited strict adherence to balanced clauses (*duijü*) and pairs of characters (*shudui*) throughout, but this feature became particularly rule-like in Wang's framing of the argument via the three major legs of the essay.⁴⁷ As the examination essay's length increased from 500 characters in late Ming times to over 700 during the mid-Qing, the basic structure of the essay remained unchanged. During the Jiajing emperor's reign, however, a dispute in the 1543 Shandong provincial examination over the veiled criticism of the throne in the "conclusion" of an 8-legged essay led to a decline in the practice of ending the essay with rhetorical flourishes.⁴⁸ In the Kangxi era, the concluding section was dropped by imperial fiat and replaced by a summary.⁴⁹ An additional leg was frequently added to the Qing essay, which meant there could be four perfectly parallel and numerically balanced paragraphs building on the theme of the quotation assigned.⁵⁰

Chain arguments were built around pairs of complementary propositions. They derived their cogency from literary traditions that over the centuries had drawn on both the parallel- and ancient-style prose traditions of early and medieval China.⁵¹ Balanced prose pushed the argument forward via pairs of complementary clauses and sections, which, when formalized and clarified by analogies, avoided a wandering, unfocused sequence. The best 8-legged essay confirmed the vision of the sages in the Four Books and Five Classics from a “double angle of vision,” which correlated with the parallel syntax of the examination essay’s legs.⁵²

In the first leg, Wang weighed the ruler’s actions in light of the economic consequences if he followed the way of sagely governance. In the middle leg, Wang delivered a personal assessment by analogizing the households of farmers with the prince’s treasury in the first half and comparing the farmers’ fields to the prince’s vaults in the second half. The final leg presented the same points in light of the lord’s ritual and culinary needs, all the while stressing the priority of the people in any equation between taxes and wealth. Building on three balanced legs, Wang Ao concluded that raising taxes was not the sage’s preferred statecraft.

The first leg was almost Aristotelian in its explicit linkage of cause (low taxes) and effect (the people’s prosperity).⁵³ Leg two elaborated on the first by showing how low taxes would increase the overall wealth of the realm, if it remained in the hands of the people. The final leg clinched the argument by showing how low taxes would directly benefit the dynasty and not just the people. In this manner, Wang’s conclusion countered the statist discourse about the wealth and power of the dynasty, which drew on Legalist traditions. Wang successfully channeled his argument into a literati discourse built around Confucius’s vision of a polity pegged to the interests of the people.

The cognitive aspects of a literary genre as fundamental and as widely used as the 8-legged essay reveal the forms of argumentation that millions of elite male Chinese learned as young adults while preparing for local civil examinations. It is useful historically to engage in “comparative epistemology”⁵⁴ to grasp the “legs” of the late imperial classical essay as a rhetorical style of persuasion that had evolved since antiquity and compare it to the Aristotelian syllogism. In the climate of full classi-

cal literacy, the examination essay detailed how literati organized, presented, and defended their views in public literary discourse and in related fields such as law.⁵⁵ Late imperial medical examinations required the 8-legged format, as did the Taiping examinations when the Taipings changed the topics to Sino-Christian themes.⁵⁶

Catholic missionaries teaching in China in the nineteenth century understood the rhetorical properties of the 8-legged essay in light of medieval and renaissance forms of reasoning in Latin discourse. Hence, when they translated Chinese essays into Latin, they respected the literary devices deployed in classical Chinese and explored how such oratorical and poetic skills persuaded literati.⁵⁷ The Latinized versions of the rhetorical forms in the 8-legged essay restored some of the respect the 8-legged genre had among earlier Westerners.⁵⁸

1. Break open the topic (*poti*): *Apertura*
2. Receiving the topic (*chengti*): *Continuation*
3. Beginning discussion (*qijiang*): *Exordium*
4. Initial leg (*qigu*)
5. Transition leg (*xugu*): *Propositio*
6. Middle leg (*zhonggu*): *Media pars*
7. Later leg (*hougu*): *Posterior pars*
8. Conclusion (*dajie*): *Conclusio*

The epistemological significance of parallelism in a Chinese examination essay means that literature, rhetoric, and argumentation were part of the whole in the formalized 8-legged “grid” that emerged in the 1470s. That unity yielded a precise literary measure of the classical talents of millions of men crowded into the examination compounds, physically, and locked into the 8-legged essay, cognitively. The “grid” represented the more formalized 8-legged categories of rhetoric after 1475. Earlier literary “genres” for examination essays had changed over time and were then formalized in the fifteenth century into the technical rhetorical features that were used by Ming-Qing examiners to grade and rank examination essays. Provincial and metropolitan examiners scrutinized such anonymous products for their power of abstract thinking, persuasiveness, and prosodic form.⁵⁹

Using the specific “8-legged grid” of formal parallelism, examiners and tutors would trace the number of legs and count the number of characters in an essay. In marked-up examination essays that have survived, we always find numerous small circles marking the balanced and antithetical clauses in each of the legs of the essay.⁶⁰ Even in third session policy answers on the metropolitan and provincial civil examinations, which were not required to follow the 8-legged essay grid, examiners used a set pattern of markings to demarcate the main points, ends of sections, important characters, and parallel clauses.⁶¹

This classical grid requirement of balanced clauses, phrases, and characters provided examiners with a simple, impartial standard for ranking essays.⁶² The grid also included rules for presentation of the essay on paper, which necessitated proper spacing of characters from top to bottom and left to right. References to the reigning emperor, for instance, had to be highlighted by raising that column of characters higher and avoiding taboo names of the ruler. The body of the essay began at a lower level in each column. Essay drafts that survive from the early Qing reveal that candidates copied 8-legged essays onto paper divided into columns and rows to make it easier for scribes and examiners to keep track of the rule-like grid for the parallel legs of the essay.⁶³ If a candidate did not follow these strict rules of length, balance, and complementarity, then his essay was judged inferior.⁶⁴ In building a clause in one of the legs of the essay, one misplaced character or one character too many or too few could result in failure. Given the millions of civil candidates in the 1,350 yamens and compounds where local and provincial examinations were held, the official examiners rightly felt that with a stylized and formulaic 8-legged grid as a requirement, their job of reading and evaluating thousands of essays in a brief time was made easier and more impartial. Such requirements could backfire, however. If an examiner made the mistake of choosing as the top paper one that had only two of the required three legs, this was noted and scoffed at by the candidates.⁶⁵

By the late Ming, many literati felt as Gu Yanwu and Fang Yizhi did, namely, that despite the stiff requirements candidates could study the essays of recent graduates and produce passable essays on almost any quotation. In 1637, Fang wrote in his “Seven Solutions,” which pre-

sented career options for a young man from a family of means, “One may have mumbled only one chapter and memorized several thousand examination essays, but after a year goes by these essays become unsuited. Then once again one must collect and memorize the essays of those who have newly achieved rank.”⁶⁶

Although the Ming limited the essay to 500 characters and the Qing to 700, the parallel form required candidates in both eras to use the 8-legged grid to “speak in the name of the sages.”⁶⁷ This well-known appeal to literati as voices of prevailing attitudes contrasted with similar appeals in policy questions to Ming and Qing emperors as the inheritors of the political mantle of the sage-kings that was discussed in Chapter 1. Literati could repossess the “legitimate transmission of the Way” (*dao-tong*) through their 8-legged essay, but the prerogative of the emperor to reestablish his “political legitimacy” (*zhitong*, lit., “legitimate transmission of governance”) remained and entitled him to empower literati who shared his vision of cultural authority.

Using the mediating Zhu Xi commentaries they had memorized, candidates were now expected to strike out on their own and interpret a passage as if each spoke for the sage who had authored the canon. “Speaking in the name of a sage” as a rhetorical form also required exclamatory particles and single-character conjunctions, which captured the supposed diction and emotive force of the ancient language. The written essay was encoded with oratorical elements, which also informed the performative aspects of language presented in parallel phrases and clauses.⁶⁸

In his essay responding to the question “When the people have enough, how can the ruler alone have too little?,” Wang Ao deployed rigorous parallel structures to chide the ruler, gently to be sure, about raising taxes. He invoked Confucius’s disciple You Ruo, who had spoken of the unity between the interests of the people and the lord. This pre-Mencian stress on the priority of the people over the ruler (see Chapter 1) allowed Wang Ao to frame the dramatic legs of the argument in such a way that the ruler was repeatedly told to think counterintuitively. If the people are prosperous, then the ruler has no lack, no want, no worries. Wang rhetorically gainsaid raising taxes, the instinctive thing to do if the ruler sought to enhance imperial wealth, in favor of improving the

people's livelihood. Within a formulaic 8-legged grid, Wang Ao presented the long-standing literati (read as "sages") role of remonstrating with the ruler.

The cultural assault on the infamous 8-legged essay began in the nineteenth century and peaked in the twentieth. Critics charged that such essays on the Four Books and Five Classics became a byword for petrification in Chinese literature or that the essay itself was one of the reasons for China's cultural stagnation and economic backwardness. Until recently most works on Chinese literature have ignored the examination essay as a literary form or written about it with unconcealed contemporary contempt. Wang Ao's essays reveal the limits of such contempt.⁶⁹

Collecting and Publishing Examination Essays

During the Ming and Qing, a host of copyists, woodblock carvers, and printers working under the examiners inside the provincial and metropolitan examination compounds compiled examination papers in the publishing rooms. Using woodblocks, they printed essays giving examiner comments for the papers of the graduates, which were bound according to rank. Known as "hall essays" (*weimo*), these editions were also called vermillion papers (*zhujuan*), even though they were printed in black ink (*mojuan*). The black versions were based on the recopied anonymous essays (in vermillion ink) that the examiners actually read. The original essays were returned to those candidates who requested them. The final examination papers that included the comments of the associate examiners in the specialty wards were divided according to the Five Classics, as well as by the chief examiners. Hence, they were also called "ward papers" (*fanggao*) when published for the public. In addition, the best essay on each quotation or question of both provincial and metropolitan examinations was included in the official examiner's report, which he sent to the court for review by Hanlin academicians.

After the Yuan interruption, public collections of essays were again compiled in the Ming. Their prominence increased during the late Ming publishing boom.⁷⁰ In the Song, models for essays were also available, many of which were later included in Southern Song encyclopedias (*lei-*

shu) reprinted in the late Yuan and early Ming.⁷¹ The mid-Ming increase in private, commercial collections of examination essays was in part due to the formalization of the 8-legged essay during the Chenghua era. The expansion of the examination market, which during the Ming and Qing added a third tier of over 1,350 regular county and 140 prefectural examinations, dramatically increased the empire-wide pool of candidates interested in such collections from one million (in Ming times) to two or three million (in Qing times). During the Tang, there were about 60,000 registered students eligible for the capital examination. In the Song, only provincial and metropolitan examinations were held regularly, for some 400,000 candidates.⁷²

The number of model essay writers increased dramatically during the late Ming.⁷³ In addition to the “ward papers” popular during the Wanli reign (1573–1619), an imperial assortment of 8-legged essays on the Four Books first appeared in 1587, which collected various essays from several late Ming reigns. Regular publication of “contemporary-style essays” as “selected volumes” (*xuanben*) followed, which included examples of the best current 8-legged examinations. Another such collection was issued in 1592. Popular editions of a single author’s 8-legged essays, known as “drafts” (*gaoben*), which often were not actual examination essays, began in the Hongzhi reign (1488–1505). Wang Ao’s 8-legged essays, for instance, were first published under the title *Draft Essays of Wang Ao* (*Shouxi wengao*) and frequently reprinted.⁷⁴

Many other examination publications date from the late Ming and early Qing period. The expansion of commercial printing in Fujian and the Yangzi delta provinces in particular made examination essays more widely available than during the Song or Yuan dynasties. Examination essay publications were not the chief product of the printing shops and publishing houses that have received increased attention in recent research, but cumulatively such essays—and the digests, almanacs, and popular literature that were also coming out in increasing numbers—point to an increase in colloquial and classical literacy in absolute numbers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁷⁵ By the late Qing, the Classics and Dynastic Histories still did not sell as well as more popular collections of 8-legged essays, but the latter fared a poor second to sales of colloquial fiction.⁷⁶

Besides “society collections” (*hangjuan*) compiled by late Ming literary groups to rectify literary style,⁷⁷ publication of examination essays by the most recent provincial and palace graduates were successful financially, albeit short-lived. The essays of Wang Shizhen (1526–1590), a child prodigy, were widely emulated.⁷⁸ As a Hanlin academician who had done well on the examinations, his essays and views represented the Hanlin insiders in the court, who tried to influence literati taste on the basis of their public success. Wang’s son never attained high office but was the first to compile an edition of examination essays, including critical comments.⁷⁹

Competing Literati Opinions outside the Examination Compound

The growth of writing and reading publics catered to by private publishing enterprises created space for others, less successful in the examination process, to publish their own essays and gain public recognition.⁸⁰ Gui Youguang (1506–1571), who failed the provincial examinations six times before finally passing in 1540, built a wide reputation during this time for his ancient-style prose essays, enough so that he developed a bitter rivalry with Wang Shizhen, even though Gui did not receive his palace degree until the age of sixty in 1565 and then ranked only near the bottom of his class.⁸¹

Ai Nanying, whose famous 8-legged essay at the 1624 Jiangxi provincial examination provoked so much controversy because it contained a veiled attack on eunuch power, became an acknowledged master of the 8-legged essay style despite never gaining the palace degree. His own annotated collection of examination essays was the most widely heralded and became the model for late Ming and early Qing collections.⁸² Later, many of his essays, including the politically charged essay on the topic from the *Mencius*, “The people should be valued most” (*min wei gui*), was included in Fang Bao’s imperially authorized collection. This belies the usual image of an 8-legged essay as a politically innocuous work (most were) and reminds us of the censorship the *Mencius* faced in the early Ming (see Chapter 1).⁸³

The Ming loyalist Lü Liuliang’s (1629–1683) editions of 8-legged essays eventually surpassed Ai Nanying’s in popularity among early Qing literati, although Lü first annotated Ai’s collection of essays. Lü was said

to be able to write 8-legged essays at the age of eight *sui* (= “years”; see the “Conventions” chapter), but he never could get past the formidable hurdle of the Zhejiang provincial examination and withdrew in 1666 to become a physician. In addition, he became an editor of popular collections of 8-legged essays, to which he added his own views of the official rankings by examiners and at times included disparaging comments about barbarian rule in China. Such comments posthumously caused a scandal during the Yongzheng reign.⁸⁴

Dai Mingshi (1653–1713) also made a reputation as an expert writer of examination essays, despite his initial examination failures in the 1680s on the Jiangnan provincial examination. Students widely read and emulated his editions of 8-legged essays, complete with comments and analysis, even though he failed the provincial examination several times. Normally, a scholar of note achieved examination success first, before his own essays were published. When Dai passed the metropolitan examination in 1709 ranked first and the palace examination ranked second, he entered the Hanlin Academy as a compiler. Such success confirmed his reputation as a great essayist, but he lost his cultural autonomy. Two years later, accused of sedition in 1711 for using late Ming reign titles in his history of the Southern Ming dynasty, Dai was executed in 1713 and all his known works destroyed.⁸⁵

Lü Liuliang, Dai Mingshi, and others such as Li Fu (1673–1750) effectively turned the official rankings of 8-legged essays inside out. There were now two public tribunals. One derived from the official rankings. The other represented literati outside the official compounds, whose criticisms of both successful essays and the examiners reflected the more pervasive public taste for the 8-legged essay and the fact that there were many times more losers than winners. Losers tended to sympathize with the views of the cultural arbiters outside examination compounds, which usually condemned the examiners as poor judges of the 8-legged essay genre. Dai Mingshi writing in 1702 about examination essays ranked that year said as much: “Those who set the standards are out there in the empire; those who don’t set the standards are examiners!”⁸⁶ Such criticisms of examiner standards, however, were not the work of professional critics. The “professionalization” of literati cultural pursuits certainly included those who made a living by compiling, editing, and commenting

on prize-winning examination essays, especially on the Four Books, but their diffuse occupational concerns were not yet established as formalized positions in the cultural economy of premodern China.⁸⁷

Struggles over the Imperial Canon

Noted literary stylists such as the prose writer Li Panlong (1514–1570), who along with Li Mengyang (1472–1529) and others became known as the “Former Seven Masters” of the Ming because they tried to emulate Han and Tang styles of ancient-style prose writing, compiled works on the Four Books to spread their views. The Four Books were also seen as quintessentially Han literary works whose terseness and balance were the *sine qua non* of ancient-style prose. Li Panlong’s *Corrections and Defenses of the Four Books* (*Sishu zhengbian*), for instance, appeared in an era when Wang Yangming had gainsaid Zhu Xi’s views of the Great Learning, and forgeries by Feng Fang (1523 palace graduate) and others were appearing on the purported “Old Text” versions of the Great Learning, which Feng had allegedly recently discovered among stone relics.⁸⁸

Buddhism and Daoism were increasingly influential, and Ming literati-scholars such as Wang Yangming were sympathetic with the popular “three teachings are one” tenor of the time. Lin Zhao’en (1517–1598) turned his back on examination studies in 1551, and although just a licentiate he sought to teach students his own method of mind cultivation. Yuan Huang, one of the leaders of late Ming syncretic tendencies, thought his use of moral ledger books (*shanshu*) compatible with Cheng-Zhu studies. To this end he compiled the *Cutting to the Correct in the Four Books* (*Sishu shanzheng*). Buddhist and Daoist views crept into the civil examinations.⁸⁹

The degree to which Wang Yangming’s views on the Great Learning influenced literati life is clear from the many collections on the Four Books and examination essays that reflected his teachings. In his own reconstitution of the “Old Text” version of the Great Learning, Wang claimed that Zhu Xi had misrepresented the original version of the Great Learning by adding Zhu’s own commentary to the “investigation of things” (*gewu*) passage and passing it off as canonical. This textual debate became one of the sources for the popularity of philology and evidential research to resolve such puzzles.⁹⁰

Wang Yangming's views took hold among examination candidates during the Jiajing reign (1521–1567). In the 1523 metropolitan examination, for example, examiners composed a policy question meant to be critical of Wang's teachings, and several of Wang's many disciples from Jiangxi province who took the examination walked out in protest. Another of them used the occasion to celebrate his master's teachings and was rewarded with a palace degree. Other graduates were duly impressed with Wang Yangming's teachings. The anti-Wang atmosphere among examiners lessened by the Longjing reign (1567–1572). Thereafter, what Cheng-Zhu advocates considered "heterodox studies" steadily penetrated the civil examinations.⁹¹

Jiajing era commentaries on the Four Books also reveal this partial turn from orthodox Cheng-Zhu interpretations to newer views drawn from Wang Yangming and his disciples.⁹² Jiao Hong (1541–1620), the 1589 *optimus* and Hanlin academician, was ecumenical in his classical scholarship. In a 1594 collection on the Four Books honoring the best 100 Ming literati-scholars, Jiao included Wang Yangming and his followers, as well as those who upheld the Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy, to highlight Ming interpretations of moral principle.⁹³ Such ecumenism was not unusual even among Cheng-Zhu loyalists, who were more critical of Wang Yangming's most radical disciples in the early seventeenth century than of Wang himself. Classical ecumenism also drew a larger audience of buyers and readers of such books.⁹⁴

Although the opinions contained in these collections were diverse, and new trends were apparent, the "Way learning" mainstream was generally upheld by most of the Four Books compilations that have survived. Tang Binyin's (b. 1568) *Collected Notes Amplifying the Four Books* (*Sishu yangming jizhu*) claimed to contain what Zhu Xi would have included if he were still alive.⁹⁵ But few were left unaffected by the Wang Yangming partisans. "Way learning" of the late Ming and early Qing was in many respects a post-Wang Yangming revival of Cheng-Zhu learning that affected the interpretation of "Way learning" in examinations and in collections on the Four Books. As more and more such collections publicly incorporated Wang's views in the Wanli era (1573–1619), they also opened the door to examination essays and commentaries that included Buddhist or Daoist interpretations.⁹⁶ Looking back from the vantage of the Qing dynasty,

Yu Changcheng blamed disciples of Wang Yangming for Chan Buddhist doctrine entering literati thought. Both Ai Nanying and Gu Yanwu attacked Wanli-era examinations for 8-legged essays with Chan doctrine.⁹⁷

In addition to heterodox elements entering the 8-legged essays by literati influenced by Daoism and Buddhism, another late Ming scholarly trend was the revival of Han and Tang dynasty scholia that had been dropped from the official classical curriculum in the early Ming. Some Ming scholars were increasingly critical of the Yongle-era trilogy of classical commentaries and sought instead to revive classical studies by combining evidential research with studies of the Four Books. Already in the 1516 Zhejiang provincial examination, one of the policy essays had criticized the penetration of “reliable learning” (*kaoju xue*; see Chapter 7) in Ming civil examinations, which began in the fifteenth century. Fang Bao was critical of mid-Ming 8-legged essays for their weak grasp of Han-Tang commentaries.⁹⁸

Zhang Pu’s *Search for Completeness in the Four Books* (*Sishu kaobei*), which he completed while leading the Restoration Society in the last years of the Ming, was an evidential study of persons mentioned in or associated with the Four Books. It represented a 1642 follow-up to Xue Yingqi’s (1500–1573?) *Study of Persons in the Four Books* (*Sishu renwu kao*), published in 1557. Later in the early Qing, the evidential research scholar Yan Ruojun (1636–1704) prepared a geographical study entitled *Explanations of Place-Names in the Four Books* (*Sishu shidi*). Evidence and analysis were now applied to the canonical Four Books.⁹⁹

Looking back on these developments in Four Books studies, the 1780s editors of Qianlong’s “Complete Collection of the Four Treasuries” (*Siku quanshu*) imperial library commented on how much had changed since the sixteenth century: “In the Ming period, literati emphasized the 8-legged essays. These essays in turn stressed the Four Books. As a result, we have authoritative works like this one [i.e., the *Study of Persons in the Four Books* by Xue Yingqi]. They patch together and rip apart sources to allow candidates to impress examiners. This approach represents an extreme in the corruption of classical techniques.”¹⁰⁰ Such Qing haughtiness described how far studies of the Four Books had moved in their Ming drift away from Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy toward first Wang Yangming studies and then evidential research.

Early Qing commentaries to the Four Books followed late Ming currents away from Wang Yangming. In 1645, the Qing fixed the order of the three quotations from the Four Books on provincial and metropolitan examinations. Either the Great Learning or the Doctrine of the Mean had to be the source of one of the three quotations. The other two were mandated from the *Analects* and the *Mencius*. In 1658, the emperor now selected the Four Books quotations for the metropolitan examination.¹⁰¹ The collections prepared by Lü Liuliang and Dai Mingshi, cited above, differed from those of Ai Nanying, for example, because of Lü's and Dai's care in supplementing Cheng-Zhu studies with Han and Tang scholia. In the eighteenth century, during the height of the revival of Ancient Learning, the use of pre-Song scholia in 8-legged essays peaked. In 1779 the Qianlong emperor personally reviewed essays on a quotation from the *Analects* in the Shuntian provincial examinations and accused them of being unacceptably at variance with Han and Tang classical commentaries.¹⁰²

The turn to "ancient studies" (*guxue*) that began in the Ming climaxed in the Qing. This in turn impacted both classical studies and the civil examination essays. Mao Qiling (1623–1716) and others who emphasized the importance of Han-Tang scholia for Four Books studies also influenced later literati such as Dai Zhen (1723–1777), who would gainsay Cheng-Zhu "Way learning" interpretations. Subsequently, Ruan Yuan, a distinguished Han Learning scholar, compiled a definitive work on the history of the Four Books and its commentaries in the civil examinations. Entitled *Comments on Examination Essays on the Four Books* (*Sishu wen hua*), Ruan's collection paralleled the 1843 publication of Liang Zhangju's influential *Collected Comments on the Crafting of 8-legged Civil Examination Essays*, which also detailed the literary content of and institutional machinery for the 8-legged essay for a wider audience.¹⁰³

Making Literary Taste Official

Qing imperial collections of examination essays were modeled on the Ming. In addition to the essays based on ancient-style prose that the Song Learning partisan and Tongcheng classicist Fang Bao collected together under imperial auspices in 1737, numerous other anthologies of ancient-style prose were also published between 1704 and 1750. Implicated in the

Dai Mingshi treason case, Fang Bao, after his political rehabilitation, sought to unify “Way learning” with the ancient-style literary tradition and reinvigorate the 8-legged essay with new life and relevance in an age of increasing Han scholia-oriented evidential research.¹⁰⁴

Fang Bao’s collection was subdivided into four collections of Ming essays (486 total) and one collection of Qing essays (297 total) through the end of the preceding Yongzheng reign in 1735. In addition, Fang gave in his preface a brief literary account of how the 8-legged essay had evolved after 1465. During the mid-Ming (1465–1506), in a tradition that dated from the early Ming, examination candidates, according to Fang, stayed close to the text of the Four Books and Five Classics and followed the commentaries. Their language was constrained and followed the rules of the form exactly, but they often misconstrued the commentaries.¹⁰⁵

Fang contended that in the second age, from 1506 to 1567, outstanding writers such as Tang Shunzhi (1507–1560) and Gui Youguang were able to equate ancient-style prose with contemporary-style essays and thereby brought Ming essays to their height. Fang believed that during the third period (covering 1567 to 1620), the 8-legged essay declined because writers became overly concerned with literary devices and as a consequence lost classical substance. Similarly, according to Fang, the essays from the fourth period (1621–1644) declined into subjective points of view that were read into the quotations. Despite these caveats, Fang included more essays from the fourth period than from any other in his collection.

Fang Bao was more discreet about rating the Qing essays he included. His own experiences of exile under Manchu rule taught him that literature and politics were an explosive mix. To include Ming essays such as Ai Nanying’s political critique of the Tianqi reign (1621–1628) was as far as he dared go. Instead, for the Qing essays, Fang appealed rhetorically to their synthesis of the finest points in Ming essays of all four periods and concluded his account with the summation that all Qing essays included in the collection “illuminated meanings and principles” (*faming yili*) of “orthodox learning” (*zhengxue*), which was a reference to “Way learning.” His intent was to draw the examination essay into a defense of Cheng-Zhu learning at a time when ancient learning and parallel prose were challenging such pretensions by associating the 8-legged essay with pre-Song forms of balanced prose.¹⁰⁶

What Fang Bao succeeded in doing, however, was to augment the 8-legged essay's distinguished place in China's literary history beyond what Gui Youguang and other Ming literati, who as unofficial outsiders but masters of the genre, had already done. To that point, individuals such as Ai Nanying, Lü Liuliang, and Dai Mingshi had rescued the 8-legged essay grid from its dismal cultural prisons and made it into a viable genre that could stand on its own in the publishing world. Their literary pedigree was limited to literati life outside the official examinations, however, which gained the grid a measure of literary autonomy.

Fang Bao brought that pedigree into the Qing imperial court and gave the essay an encomium. Some whose essays had been included in Fang's collection, for instance, had been unsuccessful in the examinations.¹⁰⁷ The grid now encompassed civil examinations and literati taste in genres, a trend that the Manchu dynasty was happy to co-opt. Moreover, Fang's collection gainsaid the seventeenth-century tradition of criticism of the 8-legged essay by literati such as Gu Yanwu, which modern scholarship has inadvertently cited as the rule rather than the exception. In the midst of a period of significant reform of the examination curriculum that lasted from 1740 to 1793, Fang Bao's collection gained imperial support. The 8-legged essay survived its critics and became an accepted genre for both civil examinations and literati collections. In 1781 and again in 1814, officials asked that model examination essays prepared since Fang Bao's collection be reissued to the public.¹⁰⁸ Late-Qing attacks on the 8-legged essay, which climaxed in the 1898 reforms, conveniently elided this cultural pedigree and stripped the genre of its meaning and significance in literati life.

Writing in the late eighteenth century, Li Tiaoyuan spoke in praise of the longevity and the vital role played by the civil examination process in selecting officials since the early Ming. Li's pioneering study of Ming-Qing civil examinations, frequently cited in this volume, took stock of their influence on the daily lives of the people and well represented the late eighteenth-century view of the examinations as a positive influence overall, despite the many inadequacies Li also described.

This positive assessment carried over to the literati role as examiners. Serving on such staffs, they shared responsibility with the court for setting the literary and scholarly standards acceptable in examination essays

and for periodically changing the scope of knowledge tested in the official curriculum. The same literati when appointed as examiners could set the range of policy issues that candidates for office were expected to master. After 1425, literati examiners were partners of the dynasty in gauging the examination market.

Canonical Standards and Limits to the Dynastic Control of Knowledge

The bureaucracy made an enormous financial commitment to staffing and operating the empire-wide examination regime. Ironically, the chief consequence was that late Ming examiners no longer could take the time to read each individual essay carefully. Final rankings, even for the 8-legged essay, were very haphazard. While acknowledging the educational impact of the curriculum in force, we must guard against overinterpreting the classical standards of weary examiners inside examination halls as a consistent or coherent attempt to impose orthodoxy from above. The examiners' role in upholding the standards used in the rankings increasingly resembled a complicated guessing game. They often noted only obvious errors.

An interpretive community, canonical standards, and institutional control of formal knowledge came together via examiners in the examination halls empire-wide. Such public political power did not translate into a closed intellectual world of literary taste, however, or an unchanging "Way learning" orthodoxy. Their analytic framework for moral reasoning presupposed influential linguistic assumptions about the behavioral consequences of testing moral categories and literary distinctions, which were invariably disproven in practice. Civil examiners served the court as a community of classical and literary specialists, who interpreted the classical canon, prescribed how it would be tested institutionally, and determined the literary standards used for rankings. Through these cultural and institutional mechanisms, they controlled, in theory, access to most important political appointments in the bureaucracy. The historical integrity of the early Ming classical canon (see Chapter 1) would remain largely unaltered until the eighteenth century, when Manchu rulers were persuaded by their literati advisers to initiate an era of major curricular reform (see Chapter 8).

Examiners oversaw the intertextual assemblage of quotations to test from the Four Books, Five Classics, and Dynastic Histories. As successful graduates, they were in effect licensed practitioners of classical learning. Their interpretive authority helped reproduce and alter the authority of the orthodox “Way learning” persuasion in the examination compound. Their efforts to control interpretations ensured that the dynasty’s cultural conservatism was based on the authority of a fixed canon. They could not always dictate the hermeneutic procedures candidates would apply in their essays, however, as in the case of Wang Yangming’s followers. Novelty and literary creativity could not be legislated out. New styles and interpretations allowed the classical essays to evolve into an important genre outside examination halls.¹⁰⁹

The grammar, rhetoric, and balanced phraseology of the examination essay ironically turned “Way learning” into a literary contest. The orthodox interpretation of “Way learning” and the prescribed chain argument for moral rhetoric were screened through the 8-legged style. Examiners were not only representatives of the court and its bureaucracy but also participants in literati culture and in tune with its vicissitudes. Their interpretive style often narrowed the classical language, filtered the prescribed conceptualization, and constricted the stylistic genres that were favored and left some, such as poetry, out altogether (before 1756).¹¹⁰

The required embellishment of antiquity by candidates necessitated formulaic language to transmit the vision of the ancients. That “antiquity” was based on the Cheng-Zhu reconstruction of the classical canon (see Chapter 1). Although inevitably diluted by its rote mastery, the emphasis on “Way learning” implied that if every literatus became an exemplar of virtue, the dynasty, its elites, and peasantry would prosper. In Wang Yangming’s hands, moral knowledge and human action were equated during the late Ming. For both Wang and Cheng-Zhu learning, political, social, and cultural harmony depended on the moral rigor of each individual.

Examiner standards translated into the forms of distinction acceptable in official circles. Outside dissent, popular religions, and the mantic arts challenged but never overturned these classical foundations (see Chapter 5). Reified as a set of cultural genres (ancient-style prose, parallel

prose, etc.) and expressed through the 8-legged grid, the classical essay became a meeting ground where the dynasty chose its officials and literati expressed the classical vision of the sage-kings. In Wang Ao's time, circa 1475, and thereafter until 1900, examiners selected stylistic answers written in 8-legged essay forms as models for emulation.

Final Rankings

Institutionalization via civil examinations, however, required substantial modification of the required literary formalism.¹¹¹ In practice, the scope and magnitude of Ming civil examinations were daunting. The chief examiner for the 1523 metropolitan examination noted that in selecting 400 graduates the seventeen associate examiners and two chief examiners were divided into fifteen wards and had gone through some 3,600 separate rolls (*juan*; roughly "chapters") of essays, almost one roll for each of the 3,800 candidates for all three sessions. The fifty-five examination officials had to handle approximately sixty-nine candidates and sixty-five rolls each. The associate examiners had to read over 220 rolls each.¹¹²

By the Qing, the numbers of candidates in local and provincial examinations had increased so much that the examiners, even though their ranks were increased, had trouble keeping up with the numbers of examination papers. For instance, the chief examiner of the 1742 metropolitan examination reported that the four chief examiners and eighteen associate examiners had read 5,073 rolls of papers produced by 5,913 candidates, from which they had selected twenty-two essays from 319 graduates to include in the official record. Each associate examiner had to read approximately 282 rolls for 328 candidates. Only 5.4 percent passed.¹¹³

The court extended grading deadlines in 1711, but the chief examiner for the 1729 Guangdong provincial examination noted in the preface for his official report that it took twenty days to grade papers by some 9,000 candidates. The examiners selected only 78 graduates (0.9 percent) and the top twenty-two essays.¹¹⁴ Qian Daxin (1728–1804), who supervised four provincial examinations between 1759 and 1774, laid out the practical difficulties the examiners faced in maintaining high standards, when he reported on the 1762 Hunan provincial examination:

The number of the rolls of essays was huge, and the time [to grade them] was limited. If we were to say that those we chose were always correct, or that even one man of talent was not overlooked, then, sincerely, I would not dare to believe this myself. We did our best, however, to open the path for selection widely and to evaluate the papers impartially.¹¹⁵

After 1465, the top three finishers on the provincial and metropolitan examination were usually those who composed the best essay(s) on one of the three quotations from the Four Books. They were then distinguished from each other by their rank on the classical essays, by the discourse question in session two, or by their rank on the policy questions in session three. Until 1787 the top five finishers were also selected on the basis of the best specialization essay for each of the Five Classics. Ming examiners thus still had their hands full grading papers, even though the 8-legged essays on the Four Books took precedence. Important changes in the grading of essays on the Four Books occurred in the transition from the Ming to Qing dynasty.

During the early Qing, however, this evaluation approach changed. Civil examiners in both the provincial and metropolitan examinations tended to rank a single candidate's three essays on the Four Books as uniformly superior to all others, thereby justifying his higher rank. The rule was to select one candidate as the top Four Books essay writer. This procedural change made a great difference, and candidates knew this from the final rankings and official reports. It meant that Qing examiners could rely almost exclusively on the Four Books to make their final top rankings, without the need to break the tie among three finalists, as was the practice during the Ming. This focus on the Four Books meant that examiners could use the essays on the Five Classics, discourse quotation, and policy question at their discretion to corroborate rankings based on the Four Books.

This change is corroborated by the significant decrease in the length of examiner comments on prize essays from the Ming to the Qing. During the Ming, examiners typically wrote several sentences of evaluation in the final report. By the Qing, examiners barely had enough time to write short phrases in eight characters (e.g., "deep thoughts, rich in

force, sufficient life, and perspicacious”),¹¹⁶ four characters (e.g., “studies that have a base”),¹¹⁷ or single characters (e.g., “selected” or “hit the mark”).¹¹⁸ These brief comments gave no sign of why the essays were distinguished from each other. As the Qing dynasty progressed, the length of examiner comments decreased from eight- to one-character evaluations.¹¹⁹

In the Ming, the court had already begun to complain that policy questions were not taken seriously enough. In 1527 and again in 1564, the Jiajing emperor demanded that examiners stress the policy questions and ordered that all those whose answers were worthless should fail, regardless of the caliber of their Four Books or classical essays.¹²⁰ Although less important, policy questions during most of the Ming were taken seriously. The best essays in both provincial and metropolitan examinations were usually written by the top five candidates, which helped examiners to make their final choices about the rankings. In 1445, when Shang Lu received “three firsts,” none of his 8-legged essays on the metropolitan examination were deemed the best. He ranked number one on the basis of his outstanding discourse, memorial, and policy essays on sessions two and three (see Chapter 5).¹²¹

The Qing change in the evaluation of the Four Books meant that policy questions during session three were increasingly undervalued (see Chapter 7. After 1654, the rankings of candidates whose policy essays were classed as the best were increasingly ranked below the top ten graduates. Except for a brief revival of importance during the 1660s and again in the 1890s, graduates who ranked as low as eighty-eighth (1693) or ninetyeth (1852) could have their policy essay chosen as the best. In 1825 the graduate who ranked sixty-eighth on the Shuntian provincial examination wrote the best essays for all five of the policy questions, a practice that was unheard of during the Ming. Examiners became so harried in the Qing that they chose one person’s policy essays as the best, thus obviating the need to choose someone different on each of the five questions. What had happened to the evaluation of the Four Books in the early Qing now repeated itself for the policy questions in the late Qing.

The result in Qing times was that many students merely went through the motions in preparing session two or three answers, knowing that

examiners determined the rankings based on the first session. The logistical scope of grading papers and ranking candidates deflected examiners and candidates alike away from a purely “classical map” of moral and literary distinction. Classical knowledge for each question had not been applied as expected. The examiners, who represented the literary and classical trends of each reign, selectively influenced the way “Way learning,” classical erudition, historical knowledge, and literary flair were presented to the candidates. Pressured by limited time and vast numbers of papers to grade, practical considerations outweighed the formalistic standards on which the curriculum rested.¹²²

Haphazard Rankings

What seriously undercut the authority of civil examiners and the credibility of the classical curriculum and allowed notions of fate to infiltrate widely the minds and hearts of those grading or taking the examinations was the lack of consistency in the rankings from test to test or from lower level to higher level of examination. So few repeatedly ranked at the top of each examination they took that it was assumed on any given examination anyone could finish first and someone who had finished first before could also finish last.

Part of the reason for this was examiner incompetence or corruption. More important, the increasing numbers of candidates in late Ming times created a vast pool of classically literate males at the local level, many of whom were as competitive in terms of formal education as anyone else in the examination market. Once the classical illiterates, primer-literates, and semiliterates were weeded out in the local qualifying and licensing examinations, the provincial examinations weeded out 99 percent of the rest, with generally only the repeaters able to pass this provincial degree hurdle and move on to the capital for the palace degree.¹²³

Even in the Ming metropolitan and palace examinations, there were few correlations in rankings from one test to the next. In fact, the renowned *optimus* could finish 240th on the 1469 metropolitan examination and rank only eighty-third on the provincial. In 1568, the *optimus* ranked eighty-fourth on his provincial examination and 351st (out of 410 graduates) on the metropolitan. Going through the list, close correlations in results were rare. This was why Shang Lu, who had “three

firsts” in 1445, was so honored and also why he prevented others from emulating his feat in 1475.¹²⁴

Haphazard rankings continued throughout the Qing dynasty. Other than Chen Jichang, who achieved “three firsts” in 1820, or Lu Kentang (1650–1696), who had “two firsts” in 1685, few of the rankings of Qing dynasty *optimi* on the provincial, metropolitan, or palace examination correlated. On the metropolitan examination, twenty-one (35 percent of the sample) ranked below number 100, while seven (12 percent) ranked below number 200. Only sixteen *optimi* (29 percent) ranked in the top ten on the metropolitan examination; fewer (15, or 25 percent) finished in the top ten on the provincial examination. A total of only five *optimi* in my sample (8 percent) finished in the top ten on both the provincial and metropolitan examinations.

Addition of a poetry question after 1756 and elimination of the discourse question in 1793 further changed the standards used to weigh individual essays and rank the candidates. The requirement, promulgated after 1786, that candidates memorize all Five Classics also changed the dynamics favoring the Four Books over the Classics. Standards, classical interpretations, and control of formal knowledge were compromised by the sheer enormity of the examination regime. Literati opinion from without, drawing on popular religion and the mantic arts, frequently contested the examination regime.

The stock interpretation in Ming and Qing popular literature of the examiner as a bumbling fool drew on these realities and painted a comic background to the selection process. Even a powerful and influential Hanlin academician and imperial secretary such as Zhuang Cunyu could become the brunt of jokes by candidates who ridiculed him for his notorious “preference for short essays.” Anyone who wrote no more than 300 characters in an 8-legged essay (550 were the mid-Qing norm) had a chance to rank among the highest when Zhuang was the examiner. The candidates had little sympathy for Zhuang’s dilemma as he faced the insuperable task of reading thousands of examination papers.¹²⁵

Despite their rhetorical and literary differences, student essays reproduced an overall consistency of classical content from the late Ming to the mid-Qing, which made grading even more difficult. This arena contrasted sharply with the diversity of opinion in the private domains of

local literati debate. There were a wide range of scholarly opinions and classical positions variously defended by literati. In the precincts of the examination system, however, diversity was for the most part stigmatized, except for periods of literati ferment in the sixteenth and late eighteenth century. Unintentionally, the appeal of “Way learning” to universal principles provided the late empire with a unified ideology to combat perceived threats to the political and moral status quo provoked by Wang Yangming and others. Evidential learning in the eighteenth century provoked a more serious threat in the late eighteenth century because of its philological fundamentalism.

Forms of Resistance, Political Groups, and Organized Dissent

The guards assigned to the examination halls were there because they were needed to prevent cheating, corruption, and irregularities. Two official doctors were added to the staff inside Qing provincial and metropolitan examination compounds after 1800. As more problems arose, more and more overseers were also needed for “special assignments.” Special guards were always on the watch in the alleys to keep candidates from passing notes to each other. Other watchmen were posted atop the central examiners’ yamen or on towers at the corners of the walls to watch for outsiders passing materials in or insiders passing information to each other. The levels of cheating and corruption that occurred represented insubordination to the premeditated surveillance. The candidates were not as docile as they appeared and had devised numerous tactics to counteract what they perceived as the oppressiveness of the process. They attempted to counter power that was, in their eyes, masquerading as orthodox knowledge.¹²⁶

Cheating and Irregularities

Tang and Song examiners regularly discussed cheating and devised procedures to deal with it. In 1225, for example, cheating in Southern Song examinations was endemic, and irregularities such as plagiarism were noted in the 1230s and 1240s. In Ming times, the time-honored techniques of cheaters, which at times depended on collusion with

examiners, were well known: (1) impersonation (“assuming someone else’s name,” or “sitting in someone else’s cell”), whereby an experienced, usually older, essay writer entered the cell in place of the actual, more youthful, candidate; (2) after the questions were announced, passing essays composed by someone inside or outside the compound to the candidate in his cell; (3) secretly carrying materials in one’s clothing into the examination cell (see Figure 2.2);¹²⁷ (4) bribing the examiners; (5) signaling one’s anonymous paper to a bribed examiner by leaving blank pages or including a secret code of two or three graphs agreed upon in advance; and (6) buying the questions in advance from an examiner or clerk.¹²⁸

Cheating was a tactic of choice in the popular imagination and in novels, plays, and stories of the time, which were usually written by those who had failed.¹²⁹ The popular tragic heroes were those who failed time after time and sometimes succumbed to cheating their way to success. The heartless villains became the examiners, inverting in the popular imagination the prestige system of those who passed legitimately and the examiners who passed them.

Examiners and clerks devised numerous devices to deal with such irregularities. Shortly after the questions were announced, for example, clerks would check each cell and mark each paper with a seal to keep the scroll of paper currently being written on from being replaced by another or with someone else’s scroll. In addition, clerks would regularly make the rounds of all cells and check the admission slips of all candidates with the cell number they currently occupied. If there were any discrepancies in the seals stamped on the paper or on the admission slips, the candidate was disqualified. Pu Songling, for instance, failed the 1687 Shandong provincial examination because he had inadvertently (or so he claimed) skipped a page in his answer sheets while writing out one of his essays.¹³⁰ Another technique to control cheating included seating the best candidates (based on the lists from local qualifying examinations) in rows of cells closer to the yamen examiners. Thus “honored,” they would have less of a chance to communicate with lesser talents in the compound.¹³¹

Gatherings of thousands of candidates in examination compounds could get ugly, overturning the characteristic decorum of docile candidates under the watch of their “teachers.” Besides fires, epidemics could

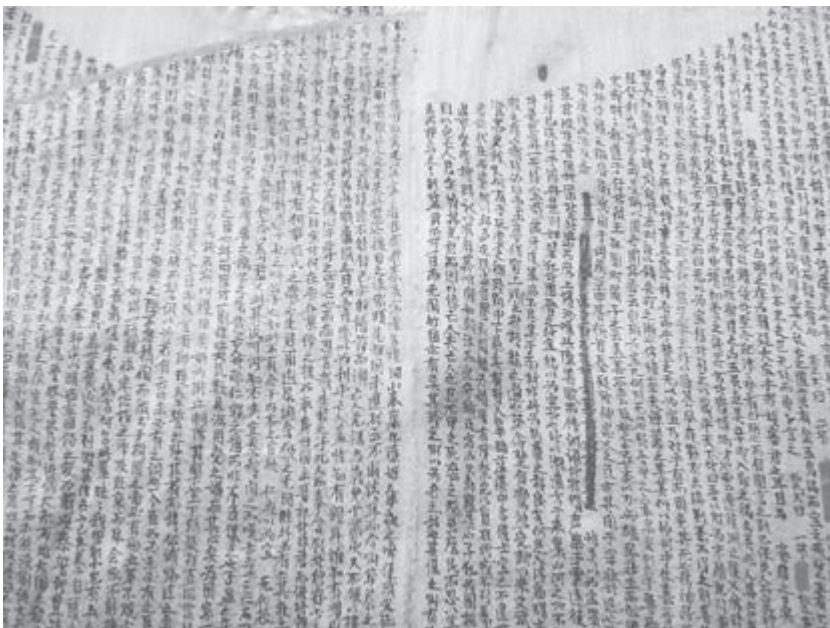


Figure 2.2. Cheating shirt (top; with detail, bottom). © The East Asian Library and the Gest Collection, Princeton University.

threaten the examination hall, which brought outsiders together for several days in one confined place. Riots broke out when the candidates acted on rumors that there were irregularities in the proceedings or instances of examiner corruption. Even a mistaken character in the question could lead to strikes and protests.¹³² In 1567, for example, the civilian candidates for the Nanjing provincial degree rioted when they learned that the quota for graduates had been significantly reduced. They also verbally abused the chief examiners.¹³³ Later, in 1603, an examination riot occurred in Suzhou. The licentiates were irate that the prefect supervising the local examination allegedly had tampered with the papers of some candidates. When the next round of the local examination began, some candidates protested, and the prefect ordered one of them beaten. In the ensuing melee, candidates and the crowd milling outside rioted by throwing rocks and bricks, thus turning the examination protest into a public disturbance. The prefect was attacked physically and later was allowed to resign.¹³⁴

Qing dynasty protests also deteriorated into riots. In the 1699 Shuntian provincial examination, there were reports of irregularities, and the chief examiners, although apparently innocent, were initially punished. In 1705, the provincial candidates in Shuntian paraded through the streets and symbolically beheaded two straw men representing the chief examiners. Subsequently in 1711, a riot occurred in Yangzhou prefecture when disappointed candidates saw the final results and accused the chief examiner, a Manchu, of selling degrees to the sons of salt merchants. The rioters marched through the streets, posted their grievances, and broke into the prefectural school, where they kept the education official hostage. The Manchu and the Chinese governor impeached each other over the case, and the scandal dragged on into 1712, when the Kangxi emperor dismissed both from office.¹³⁵ In 1711, two provincial candidates in Jiangnan were discovered to be classically illiterate, and the chief examiners were fired. Investigators later learned that the candidates ingeniously buried written material inside the examination compound before the provincial examination was held in August. Even the governor was implicated in the case.¹³⁶

In addition, cheating was notorious among bannermen taking military examinations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In 1758,

the emperor's personal adviser and Yangzi delta literatus, Zhuang Cunyu, was almost sacked when his stringent surveillance provoked a bannermen riot in the Beijing compound. Initially Zhuang was held responsible for the case, but the Qianlong emperor bailed him out and pointed the finger at the notorious behavior of the bannermen:

If they [the eight Manchu banners] want to study the Chinese language, then they must also devote their minds to oral recitations. [In this way], they will have the strength to take the examinations. If they cannot compose the written answers by themselves, and can only cheat by passing slips of paper containing the answers, or by secretly carrying notes or books into the examination room, thereby through reckless luck achieving an honored name, then the time spent in studying Chinese can be seen as a deleterious means for taking laws and regulations lightly and indulging in corrupt practices.¹³⁷

Bribery and Its Consequences

Candidates often came from wealthy families and could bribe clerks and guards who were usually of lower social status. The social discrepancy between clerks and candidates was a serious problem, particularly because male children of clerks were forbidden since 1384 from taking the civil examinations, dooming them to hereditary sinecures in local yamens, which they perceived as an inadequate reward for their services.¹³⁸ In some cases, a clerk's son took the provincial examinations by entering false information on the required recommendation forms, which were transmitted to the provincial level, after the magistrate was bribed.¹³⁹ If clerks could bribe magistrates in this way, then the local elite could also see to it that their sons were ranked highly on the provincial list. Legalized sale of Imperial School degrees during the Ming and Qing dynasties made the difference between bribery and legal purchase a matter of position and wealth, by equating official status with financial means.¹⁴⁰

The most serious problem from the point of view of the dynasty was bribery of the chief and associate examiners, because this usually involved large sums of money and could lead to riots in the compounds if others learned about it. The provincial education commissioner was the most susceptible because he served in the provincial capital for three

years and regularly made the rounds in his jurisdiction supervising the licensing and qualifying examinations. Prefects and magistrates could also place certain licentiates at the top of the provincial examination list of names as a favor to a relative or friend.¹⁴¹

Because late Ming chief and associate examiners of the provincial examinations were court outsiders specially appointed by the Ministry of Rites, they were harder to influence in the provinces. Some of the associate examiners came from the Hanlin Academy and would be more difficult to approach by local candidates without well-placed relatives or friends.¹⁴² Critics noted, however, that when a Hanlin academician received his assignment to be a provincial examiner, his supplies and travel requirements were paid by the counties, departments, and prefectures he passed through. In addition, a Hanlin examiner could expect gifts from local officials and local literati before and after the examinations.¹⁴³

In the metropolitan examination, moreover, the pressure on Hanlin examiners could also come from the court. The most famous case of a high official who influenced examiners during the Ming dynasty involved the senior minister Zhang Juzheng (1525–1582), who allegedly tried to influence the metropolitan examiners in 1574 to select his oldest son for the palace examination that year. Later his second son took his palace degree in 1577, and a third passed as the *optimus* in the 1580 palace examination. It was plausible to many that Zhang could influence the examiners because the Wanli emperor had left day-to-day executive matters in his hands. Such charges were never proven.¹⁴⁴

Because it was structural, corruption continued empire-wide in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries despite the Qianlong emperor's (r. 1736–1795) 1741 edict demanding that examiners prevent irregularities in provincial examinations.¹⁴⁵ Later in 1752, a proctor in the 1752 Shuntian provincial examination accepted a bribe from one of the candidates, who turned out to be the proctor's nephew. The candidate was deprived of his provincial degree, and his uncle was dismissed and lowered in rank.¹⁴⁶ The modern writer Lu Xun's (aka Zhou Shuren, 1881–1936) grandfather, Zhou Fuqing, a Hanlin academician from Shaoxing and the first important scholar in the Zhou family, was arrested for attempting to bribe an examiner assigned to the 1893 Zhejiang provincial examination. The scandal affected Lu Xun's family both financially and socially.

Lu left his lineage school and started on a new career path at the Jiangnan Naval Academy (1898–1899). He later transferred to the School of Mines and Railways at the Jiangnan Military Academy in Nanjing.¹⁴⁷

Laws treating corruption and bribery in civil examinations were included under a statute in the Qing legal code called “Partiality in the examination of candidates for degrees.” The statute stipulated the number of blows of the heavy bamboo meted out to officials who passed unworthy candidates or prevented worthy candidates from passing. Such guidelines descended from the Ming penal code. Penalties were considerably augmented if bribery of officials was involved. One of the Qing statutes on collusion among provincial and metropolitan examiners ordered the immediate decapitation of the guilty parties. Although the severity of such punishments was mitigated in practice, as in the case of Zhou Fuqing cited above (he was never executed for his collusion and languished in prison until 1901), the legal code made it clear that the Ministry of Personnel was committed to upholding the integrity of the civil examinations.¹⁴⁸

Protests by Candidates, Collusion with Examiners

Examinations were the only opportunity for the current and future elites of imperial China to gather as large groups. Competition separated candidates from each other, but corruption and cheating brought them together, especially when examiner favoritism or unfairness was manifest.¹⁴⁹ The consequences were serious for all involved, if the alleged corruption of examiners led to a riot. Because accusations were frequently made by disgruntled candidates, the court had to be careful. Enraged emperors often used the 1397 precedent of the Hongwu emperor to order that all irritated candidates should be reexamined when charges were unsubstantiated.¹⁵⁰

Ming records are filled with famous literati who were charged successfully or unsuccessfully with corruption when they were assigned as examiners. Some were imprisoned on the charge of selling essay themes in advance.¹⁵¹ In another case, the assistant chief examiner on the 1597 Shuntian civil examination was charged because certain Daoist phrases appeared on some examination papers. They were seen as a possible code for the examiner to recognize the author of the answer.¹⁵² Several

other late Ming examiners resigned their appointments and lived in retirement for many years.¹⁵³

Similar cases occurred during the early Qing, when the Manchu and Han bannermen conquest elite tried to control cheating among southern candidates for degrees. In the 1657 Jiangnan provincial examination, a near riot among failed candidates resulted when the examiners were charged with corruption. The candidates learned that some of the original papers supposedly prepared by candidates had no names on them and might have been prepared in advance for candidates the examiners favored. Candidates congregated at the local literary temple dedicated to Lord Wenchang, the god of literature, where they sang angry songs slandering the examiners. After review, the emperor immediately dismissed the chief and associate examiners from all offices and asked that candidates involved in the corruption be taken to Beijing for further investigation. In addition, the emperor ordered a reexamination (*fushi*) in 1658 for all the candidates who had not rioted. Subsequently, although the chief examiners were fired, their lives were spared because of previous meritorious service.¹⁵⁴

Since the Tang dynasty, civil examinations were enmeshed in court politics. Ceremonies celebrating examination graduates produced a pronounced social and intellectual solidarity between the graduates and their examiners, which exacerbated the political factions at court that the meritocratic examinations were promulgated to prevent. To counter the impact of the local “wine-drinking ceremony” for their patrons, which candidates attended before leaving for higher examinations, and the capital “ceremony of gratitude” in building patron–client relationships between examiners and graduates, the court beginning in the late Tang forbade the ceremony of gratitude.¹⁵⁵

This control policy was revived during the Five Dynasties (907–960) and Northern Song, when the focus of the examination ceremony shifted from the examiners to loyalty and affection for the emperor. The Song government also focused ritual on the palace examination, with the emperor as chief examiner, and required the graduates to attend the ceremony of gratitude for him before attending the ceremony to Confucius in the Imperial Academy. The capital ceremony of gratitude performed for the emperor became increasingly grander during the Ming and Qing dynasties, but even with the main focus on the ruler, the devotion of graduates to their

examiners was never overcome. In the late Ming, for example, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) observed examination graduates weeping before their examiners and noted the lifelong friendships sealed on such occasions. Out of such well-placed friendships emerged political alliances and examination collusion that also bedeviled the Ming and Qing dynasties.¹⁵⁶

Literati Factionalism, Court Politics, and Sedition

In addition, local politics or contemporary emergencies could divert attention from the timeless principles in classical quotations chosen as topics for examination essays. Examiners and candidates had to be careful that their questions and answers were not read as political allegories. The failure to avoid certain sensitive issues or the use of banned words in examination essays could lead to disaster. A frequent cause of failure on examinations was the candidate's use of taboo characters in an essay. In 1456, the Hanlin chief examiners in charge of the Shuntian provincial examination were charged with selecting themes that violated the taboo against using characters identical with imperial names. The examiners were also charged with allowing cheating inside the examination compound. Similarly, in 1537 the two chief examiners of the provincial examination in Nanjing were accused of *lèse-majesté* in the questions they had chosen for the candidates.¹⁵⁷ Such charges frequently hid the special interests of those who made the charges.¹⁵⁸

We have seen that the controversial Ai Nanyang was banned from Ming provincial examinations in 1624 for answering a question in the Jiangxi test that was critical of eunuch power in the capital. Examiners, many of whom were by then followers of the Donglin Academy partisans in Wuxi county, brought their court politics with them to the provinces. In like fashion, examiners sent to Nanjing and Hangzhou for the 1624 provincial examinations allegedly did not pay proper homage to the eunuch leader Wei Zhongxian, who was on the verge of eliminating the Donglin partisans. As a result they were dismissed and lost their rights to register for the examinations.¹⁵⁹

The succeeding Restoration Society (Fushe), which centered on Suzhou, formed a formidable organization in 1629 dedicated to supporting its members in the court's factional struggles. It represented the largest political interest group ever organized within a dynasty, and examination

success was its time-honored route to power.¹⁶⁰ In the 1630 Nanjing provincial examination, for example, thirty Restoration Society members passed. This total represented 20 percent of the 150 provincial degrees granted in Nanjing that year out of a total of 7,500 candidates. In the 1631 metropolitan examination in Beijing, this success story was repeated, when 62 (18 percent) of the 347 graduates were Restoration Society members. Two years after its founding, several Society partisans were selected to enter the Hanlin Academy.¹⁶¹

In 1643, the top three places of 400 graduates on the palace examination all went to members of the Restoration Society. Each was eligible to enter the Hanlin Academy. Since 1631, several members had served as grand secretaries. With the fall of the Ming dynasty to Manchu conquerors, however, the Restoration Society ceased to function, although some of its members did pass Qing civil examinations.¹⁶² Ming-style factionalism quickly disappeared, and the reasons for the fall of the Ming were in part attributed to the debilitating impact of political groups such as the Donglin and Restoration Society, which had tried to press their political agendas through the civil examinations.

Manchu rulers at first were able to prevent the recurrence of literati factions using the civil examinations to further their political influence. Instead, individual cases of sedition periodically surfaced. In the 1726 Jiangxi provincial examination, for example, the provincial education commissioner Cha Siting (1664–1727) was accused of *lèse-majesté* because the first and last characters of the four-character subject he chose for the topic of an 8-legged essay, when recombined into two characters, suspiciously looked like the graphs for the Yongzheng reign title with the head of each character lopped off, implying regicide.

When an investigation revealed seditious literature in his possession and in Cha's poetry, the emperor ordered him jailed, and Cha died there the next year. His body was dismembered. Examinations were halted in Cha's home province, Zhejiang, and his two older brothers were also arrested. No provincial graduate from Zhejiang could take the 1727 metropolitan examination.¹⁶³ The succeeding education commissioner was able to convince the court to hold the 1729 provincial examination in Zhejiang on schedule, after he carried out a thorough investigation and found no evidence of lingering sedition.¹⁶⁴

In a 1740 case, the Qianlong emperor grew concerned about possible seditious content in the commentaries to the Five Classics and Four Books that the 1712 palace degree-holder Xie Jishi (1689–1756) had prepared. Xie was a Hanlin academician under Kangxi. While serving as censor in 1726 under the Yongzheng emperor, he had first been sentenced to death for making false charges against an imperial favorite but instead was exiled to Mongolia. The military commander there scrutinized Xie's exile writings and found that he still impugned the orthodox commentaries by Zhu Xi. Although again sentenced to death, he was released in 1730 and pardoned in 1735 by the Qianlong emperor on the latter's accession to the throne.

Xie in a 1736 memorial audaciously attacked the palace examination for the rigidity of its content and criticized the examiners' exclusive reliance on fixed literary principles and styles of calligraphy. When he was again investigated in 1740 and found to have included unorthodox views in his recent classical works that deviated from the "Way learning" persuasion, all of Xie's publications and woodblocks were destroyed. The governor-general in charge of the investigation reported that Xie had repented his crime. Otherwise he would have been sentenced to death a third time.

Two final examples are the 1876 local examination in Dongxian in Sichuan province and the 1895 metropolitan protest led by Kang Youwei (1858–1927), in which large groups of candidates used the gathering of examination candidates to protest contemporary issues. An example of a late Ming urban protest, the examination candidates in Dongxian were unhappy with the violent means used by local officials to deal with tax protests in the 1870s. They addressed their dissatisfaction to Zhang Zhi-dong (1833–1909), who was then education commissioner in the province, by writing complaints on their examination papers rather than preparing essays on the required quotations. Zhang memorialized the throne about the tax protest, which influenced the final decision in the case against the entrenched local officials.¹⁶⁵ On the capital level, the 1895 protest in Beijing before the metropolitan civil examination was unprecedented and signaled the impotence of the throne in political matters after the Qing defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 and the increasing power of literati opinion.

In the three chapters making up Part II of this volume, we will move from “Way learning” as the classical orthodoxy of the Ming and Qing dynasties to unraveling the unintended consequences of the civilian meritocracy. In Chapter 3 we begin by exploring the political dynamics of the civil examinations after 1450, which will allow us to understand how an empire-wide meritocratic system with a limited circulation of elites could survive for five centuries.

PART II

Unintended Consequences
of Civil Examinations

Circulation of Ming-Qing Elites

ANALYSIS OF THE STRUCTURE and process of late imperial examinations reveals that the success of the Ming system lay in its elaboration and reform of Song-Yuan civil examination models. After the 1350–1450 economic depression, the history of the civil service was, on the one hand, a story of the expansion and intensification of its institutional machinery from the capital to all 1,350 counties. Intense commercialization from the mid- to the late Ming and slow but steady demographic growth reaching 231 million subjects by 1600 contributed to this expansion. On the other hand, the secular upsurge in numbers of candidates, which continued under the Qing dynasty, was marked by the increasing dominance of a declining number (*vis-à-vis* population growth) of palace graduates over an ever increasing pool of local degree-holders and provincial graduates. In modern terms, the “doctorate” took precedence over the “master’s” and “bachelor’s” degrees.¹

In this and the next chapter, I will describe the sociopolitical consequences of the Ming expansion as it pertained principally to the civil service. Later chapters will describe the interaction between the examination marketplace and elite cultural history. The nitty-gritty aspects of the examination process and its institutional evolution produced unforeseen social, political, economic, and cultural consequences that a functional or teleological analysis of its institutional parts cannot explain. The historical consequences of the examination regime and its original intended functions are analytically distinct.

Except for the pioneering work of Ping-ti Ho, studies of late imperial civil examinations have dismissed them as an institutional obstacle to modernization. A more comprehensive view reveals that there were no *a priori* reasons that the gentry-official managerial elite reproduced by the examination regime before 1850 were by definition inefficient as political and social managers in a preindustrial society.² If we evaluate literati education solely in light of modern goals of academic specialization and economic productivity, then the social and political interactions between elite culture and imperial institutions are misrepresented historically. Where developments are comparable for both the Ming and Qing dynasties, I will describe events and processes that tell us about both while at the same time highlighting notable differences. Where the Qing significantly altered the Ming civil examinations or its practice after 1644 significantly changed, I will save that analysis for later chapters, which focus on the last stages of its development up to 1850, before the final demise of the civil examinations in 1905.

Political Reproduction of Officials

The Ming dynasty bureaucracy reproduced itself through a selection and appointment system that according to the official *Ming History* (*Mingshi*) had four major components: dynastic schools, civil and military examinations, recommendation, and appointment. The Song selection and appointment process had six aspects: examinations, schools, appointment, protection privilege, sponsored appointment, and evaluation. Although the Ming and Qing maintained a merit-rating review process comparable to the Song, other aspects, such as the protection policy and sponsored appointment to enhance family continuity, were curtailed in the late empire to keep the system's circulation of elites healthy and vibrant.³

During the Ming and Qing, those that held office by virtue of their degrees were part of a larger administrative process involving the Ministry of Rites for education and the Ministry of Personnel for appointment and evaluation. Unlike the Tang and Song, when the level of assignments and the classification of ranks had been fluid, the civil service during the Ming was governed by a strict correspondence between the

two (i.e., an official could be appointed only to a position appropriate to his rank). At the same time, Song traditions of hereditary privilege, which had compromised the fairness of Song civil examinations, were pared down.⁴

The civil service examinations in turn engendered a dynastic school system down to the prefectural level during the Song and further down to counties in the Ming and Qing dynasties.⁵ These high-level dynasty-run schools, one per county, initially prepared candidates for written tests devised by appointed examiners. Despite their initial success as an empire-wide school network, dynastic schools eventually were absorbed into the examination system and during the Ming and Qing dynasties remained schools in name only. Little actual teaching took place in them, and they simply became quota-based way stations for students to prepare on their own for civil service examinations and receive stipends for their efforts.⁶

Entry into dynastic schools presupposed classical literacy. Training in both vernacular and classical literacy was left to the private domain, and dynastic schools never entertained goals of mass education until the early twentieth century. Designed to recruit talent into what Ping-ti Ho has aptly described as the “ladder of success,” a classical education was key for social and political prestige in capital and local affairs. Oriented to antiquity and classicism themselves, imperial rulers recognized elite education based on the Classics as an essential task of government, and Chinese gentry perceived a classical education as the correct measure of their moral and social worth. Ancient wisdom, properly generalized and inculcated, tempered men as leaders and prepared them to wield political power in the central and provincial bureaucracy and in local yamens.⁷

Because imperial control over elite education was premised on the dynasty’s prerogative to select and promote officials, the government was more concerned with organizing and codifying examinations than it was with setting up schools or training teachers. The government allowed education in classical Chinese and training for examinations to drift out of dynastic schools into the private domain of tutors, academies, or lineage schools. The examination process by 1500 drew over one million young and old men into its selection process, usually over

1,000 per county. Beginning with biennial local examinations and concluding with triennial provincial and metropolitan examinations, the Ming civil service mobilized its human resources through the relentless machinery of an institutional matrix. Despite repeated criticism and constant efforts at reform, the examination life, like death and taxes, became a naturalized fixture of elite society and popular culture.⁸

More important for the dynasty, under good or bad emperors, despots or incompetents, the selection machinery ensured that every three years a new group of classically literate male adults entered the government. Freshness and new energy, although ultimately routinized, kept the Ming and Qing bureaucracy from succumbing irrevocably to corruption, absolutism, or irrelevance, as happened after 1865.⁹ After 1384, Ming provincial and metropolitan civil examinations, for example, were organized like clockwork in an elite society constantly on the move, hardly ever missing a bureaucratic beat. To celebrate imperial birthdays or auspicious events, Manchu emperors frequently authorized an extra number of special “imperial grace” examinations during the Qing.¹⁰

The Ming-Qing government affirmed seniority as a bulwark of bureaucratic autonomy. Strict procedure was supposed to prevail over personal taste in appointments and promotions. Relative autonomy from imperial fiat, which revived after the decisive interventions of the early Ming emperors (see Chapter 1), reduced but did not eliminate the ruler’s leverage in public affairs. Through personnel rules, literati officials achieved the self-respect appropriate to their status as imperial partners, which impartial examination success authorized. The dynasty accommodated elite interests, and elites provided it with legitimation and manpower.¹¹

Given the low bureaucratic density of the imperial government and steadily increasing population, the dynasty utilized strict quotas for local, provincial, and national examination competitions to limit the numbers of candidates to acceptable levels.¹² The Ming-Qing examination system integrated local towns and cities within provinces because the “ascent up the regular academic ladder recapitulated the hierarchy of administrative capitals.”¹³ Local county and prefectural dynastic schools, along with private academies, were mobilized into feeder insti-

tutions for the imperial bureaucracy.¹⁴ The nested hierarchy of local towns and cities correlated with the dynasty's control over local civil and military degrees granted by magistrates, prefects, and provincial education commissioners.¹⁵

The stability in the number of county seats in imperial China (1,180 in Han; 1,235 in Tang; 1,230 in Song; 1,115 in Yuan; 1,385 in Ming; and 1,360 in Qing) is illusory, due to the consolidation of counties as the population grew.¹⁶ The totals reveal that the number of positions for magistrates and prefects in the bureaucracy remained relatively constant at the same time that the number of candidates for such positions increased dramatically after 1500. A "secular decline in governmental effectiveness" resulted from an increasingly lower degree of bureaucratic intensity in the administration (4,000 county seats in 1585 and 8,500 in 1850 would have been required to keep pace with the early imperial density of local officials). As population rose to an estimated 231 million in the sixteenth century and then to 400–450 million in the nineteenth, this affected the dynasty's ability to regulate its tax and legal systems. The civil service selection process remained an important exception to this secular process of administrative decline, however, until the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864).¹⁷

A tug of war existed between local elites seeking to expand their influence through civil examinations and educational officials hoping to keep the "valve" of elite social circulation under political control. Lowering quotas after a period of unusual expansion in numbers of licentiates was a constant feature in educational policy. Qing rulers, for instance, equated high numbers of dissatisfied licentiates with the fall of the Ming dynasty.¹⁸ In addition, after 1425, as we have seen in Chapter 1, the dynasty applied an additional regional quota for metropolitan examinations in the capital to seek geographical balance between North and South.¹⁹

Ming and Qing emperors and their officials frequently tried to set limits on the proliferation of private academies outside the dynastic school system because at times a few dissenters, usually unsuccessfully, challenged the examination regime (see Chapter 2).²⁰ What also became contentious was the differing views literati had of the education best suited to fulfill their social and political roles. High-minded officials and

local literati often appealed to self-cultivation in private academies or at home as an antidote to the warping of classical goals by the cutthroat examination process. During the late Ming, private academies briefly became centers for dissenting political views. These challenges were themselves institutionally channeled into the civil service before factional infighting and eunuch political power precipitated a political crisis in the 1620s.²¹

Literati dissent rarely challenged social selection via the civil service or the government's right to determine social hierarchies through educational policies. Education assumed social distinctions between men and women and between literati, peasants, artisans, and merchants in descending order of rank and prestige. When this social vision became out of sync, the dynasty's vision of education changed only enough in the late fourteenth century to enfranchise merchants' sons in the examination competition. Although Koreans and Vietnamese occasionally participated in Ming civil examinations, besides holding their own, the Qing dynasty steadfastly refused to allow the classically fluent son of then customs inspector Sir Robert Hart (1835–1911) to take an early Guangxu (r. 1875–1908) provincial examination in the capital region because of the literati protest the request engendered.²²

Before 1860, positions in the civil administration carried more prestige, power, and remuneration than corresponding positions in commerce, craft guilds, or the army. Entering officialdom became the goal of all who could afford the educational time and expenses required to prepare for examinations. The government's minimum requirement that the educational system help to inculcate and reinforce the political, social, and moral values of "Way learning" to maintain the dynasty coincided with literati rhetoric exalting the sanctity of Cheng-Zhu learning and affirming the priority of civilian values as the measure of social and moral worth.

The dynasty's monopoly of those legitimate cultural symbols enabled the ruler to justify the institutional conditions necessary for staffing his government. The examination hierarchy in effect reproduced acceptable social hierarchies by redirecting wealth and power derived from commerce or military success into the civil service. Because so few candidates, less than 5 percent, could succeed in becoming officials, how-

ever, political legitimation transmitted through education could succeed only because enhanced social status was an important by-product of the examination competition at all levels.

Elite Circulation

The bureaucratic search for classically literate men to enter officialdom penetrated beyond the imperial and provincial capitals down to all counties and prefectures for the first time during the Ming.²³ During the Tang, for instance, civil examinations had been held only in the imperial capital. As in Han and Sui (581–618) times, a candidate was recommended by local elites.²⁴ Under the Song, the examinations were expanded to two levels, one in the prefectures (which during the Song were the equivalent of provinces) and one at the capital.²⁵ Although some local examinations were held, recommendation was still the rule for local students. The limited scope of Yuan local examinations meant that they were not yet an effective conduit to high office (see Chapter 1).²⁶

As the flow chart of civil examinations in Figure 3.1 shows, under the Ming, biennial licensing tests (*suikao*, lit., “yearly tests”) and triennial qualifying tests (*kekao*) were held in county, department, and prefectural yamens to choose eligible candidates for the triennial provincial examinations. In theory, two local examinations were held every three years by the magistrate, prefect, or provincial education commissioner.²⁷

Provincial examinations were followed by the metropolitan (*huishi*) and palace examinations (*dianshi*), which were the final stage of the process in the capital. Normally, candidates would take the provincial examinations in the fall and if successful move on to the metropolitan examinations in Nanjing (up to 1421) or Beijing (from 1415) in the spring of the following year.²⁸ The emperor administered a final palace examination for metropolitan graduates as a personal litmus test to ensure political loyalty to him and fair and impartial final rankings. This final stage represented a Song reversal of Tang examinations when loyalty to examiners had outweighed loyalty to the ruler. In general, this three-tiered arrangement remained in force until 1905, although the types of questions for each session were frequently changed during the Qing period.²⁹

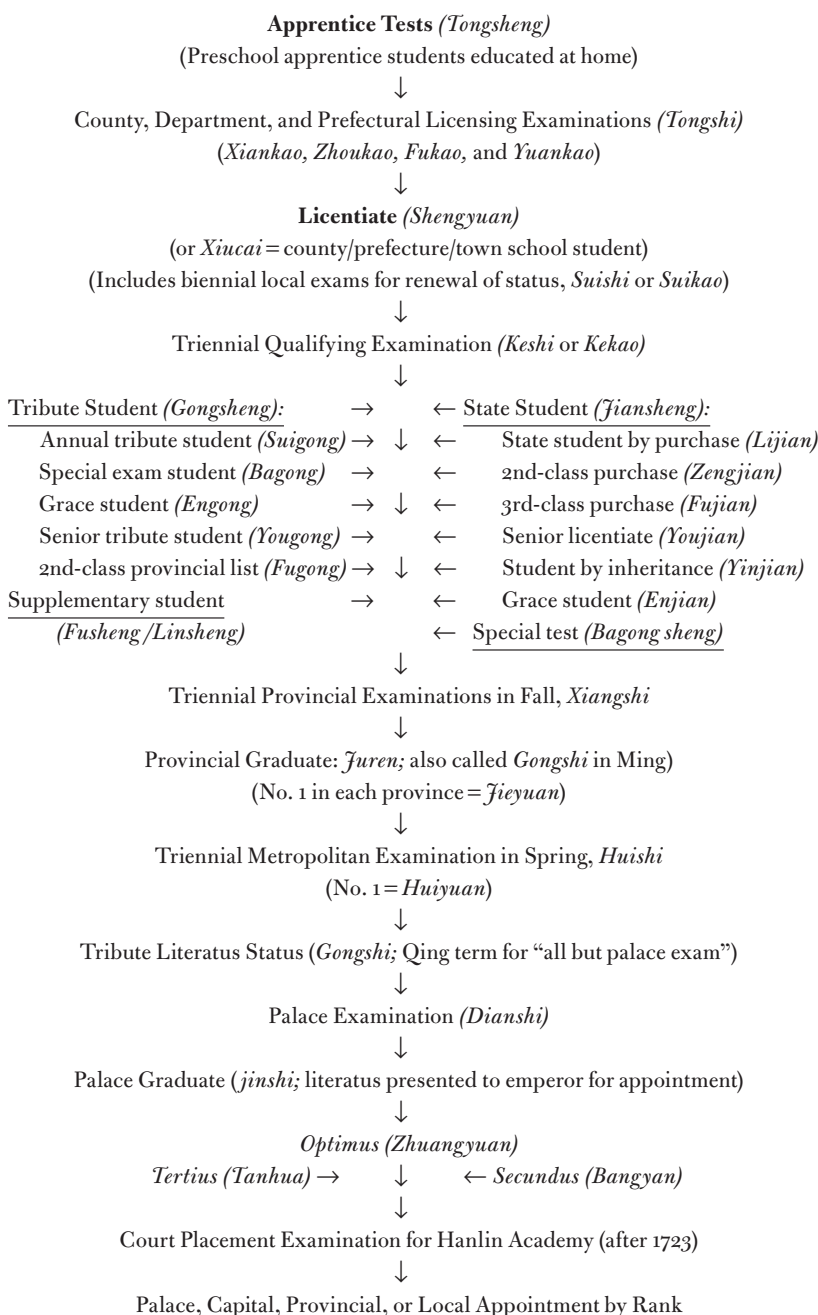


Figure 3.1. Flow chart of civil examinations and degrees during the Ming and Qing.
(Source: *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, by Benjamin Elman. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.)

Licensing and Qualifying Examinations

Biennial local examinations were held as single-day tests to appoint new candidates as dynastic school students. They also conveniently doubled as licensing tests to renew the status of past licentiates (*shengyuan*, that is, those candidates licensed to participate in higher-level civil examinations). New students were first chosen by magistrates and prefects in county, department, and prefectural tests. All new candidates and renewal students were asked to write two essays, one based on a passage from the *Four Books* and another one from the *Five Classics*. In addition, policy questions were given; after 1756 a poetry question was required.³⁰

At the insistence of the Hongwu emperor, early Ming local candidates also memorized his “Great Announcement” (*Dagao*), a tract of moral and legal admonishments. Later this was replaced by memorization of Taizu’s *Sacred Edict in Six Maxims* (*Shengyu liuyan*), which succeeding Ming emperors required to lessen the literary aspects of civil examinations.³¹ These additions became the precedent for using the Kangxi emperor’s 1670 *Sacred Edict* (*Shengyu*) and later the Yongzheng emperor’s 1724 *Amplified Instructions* (*Shengyu guangxun*) in Qing local examinations. The text was also recited during morality lectures by local officials.³²

After the candidates’ and students’ papers were reviewed for their calligraphy, style, and content by yamen clerks, they were graded.³³ Those that passed were subjected to a second and third series of similar questions, a process that continued for several days until most were weeded out. The eminent Shanghai county painter and calligrapher Dong Qichang (1555–1636), for instance, finished second on his first prefectural examination at age seventeen. When Dong inquired why his cousin had been chosen number one ahead of him, he was told, ironically given the later fame of his painting and writing style, that while his essays were outstanding in content, they were poorer in calligraphy. Dong apparently then made up his mind to practice his calligraphy.³⁴ The candidates who had survived the repeated ordeals were divided into six ranks based on style and content (*wenli*), which were evaluated in light of “Way learning” teachings.³⁵

Successful new candidates then gathered in the prefectural capital for a licensing examination (*yuankao*), which sometimes also doubled as a

qualifying examination (*kekao*) for past licentiates. There the provincial education commissioner, as he traveled on his regular testing schedule through the province, determined who would become the new licentiates for the dynastic schools. If appropriate that year, the commissioner also chose the select few, group by group, from among the new and old licentiates who could go on to compete in the provincial examination. For both the licensing and qualifying examination, the education commissioner repeated the same testing format and curriculum used in the preliminary county, department, and prefectural tests.

Gaining a place in the county, department, or prefectural school meant that the former candidates could now take the triennial qualifying examination, also supervised by the education commissioner, for the privilege to travel to the provincial capital and take the provincial examination. Given the small prefectural quotas allotted, however, most usually remained behind. Those who failed the provincial examinations returned to compete again in the next renewal and qualifying examination cycles.

Few licentiates ever became provincial graduates, so the Ming dynasty required licentiates to keep taking local renewal examinations to maintain their legal status. Thus, the local renewal test usually doubled as a county, department, or prefectural licensing test, which was required of both youthful candidates (usually under twenty) hoping to become new licentiates and for old licentiates (anywhere from twenty to sixty years old) seeking to maintain status. It was logistically impossible for local magistrates, prefects, and education commissioners to supervise so many different examinations every other year, given their other responsibilities. If they had not doubled up local civil and military examinations, magistrates and prefects would have had to hold and supervise tests continuously. In many cases, candidates for civil and military degrees were convened together rather than tested separately.

When possible, new candidates and past licentiates were also tested together, though they were usually divided by age, with twenty as the dividing line. Different questions, using the same format, were assigned to each group. Similarly, there was an overlap of new and old licentiates when the qualifying examination was held simultaneously with the final licensing examination. Whenever possible, licensing, renewal, and quali-

fying examinations were held together. The young and old were brought together in such joint examinations and tested group by group over several consecutive days.

Quotas and the Examination Market

The number of new licentiates, usually aged between seventeen and thirty-seven in Qing times,³⁶ was based on established yearly quotas for each county, department, and prefecture. Each licentiate was given a stipend paid in rice, and his family was granted tax service exemptions.³⁷ Ming quotas for the total number of licentiates in an area were initially set at forty candidates per prefecture and thirty candidates per county and department. During the Xuande reign (1426–1435), these limits were increased to sixty for the capital prefectures in Nanjing and Beijing, although they remained at forty for other prefectures. In 1392, the quota for new students was limited annually to two in the prefectural school, one annually in county schools, and only two every three years for department schools. These guidelines for quotas remained on the books into the sixteenth century but by then were ignored. After 1465, many counties had a total pool of some 2,000 licentiates taking local examinations.³⁸

Quotas for local and provincial examinations represented dynastic efforts to control the selection market for elites, just as tax quotas equalized the extraction of material resources. When compared with the Ming tax system, which extracted wealth and labor from local society, the Ming selection of literati was longer lasting and more effective in drawing on its gentry elites for political appointments. The Ming dynasty lost control of its material resources in the sixteenth century, when the tax burden increasingly fell on commoners who received none of the generous exemptions granted official families. Despite early Qing efforts to curtail the degree of tax evasion prevalent in South China, the late imperial government never regained control of its material resources.³⁹ In contrast, political selection of elites through local selection quotas remained effective until massive peasant rebellions, unprecedented demographic growth, and widespread sale of degrees to raise funds in the mid-nineteenth century seriously compromised the efficiency and integrity of the civil service.⁴⁰

Establishing quotas based on the ratio between successful and failed candidates meant that the government's intervention in elite composition

was most keenly felt at the initial stages of the examination competition.⁴¹ Elite social status and official political position were dual products of the Ming decision to institutionalize civil service examinations empire-wide in Chinese society after the Mongol hiatus. Political reproduction of officials coincided with social reproduction of local gentry (see Chapter 4). The dynasty legitimated its elite and approved their preferred curriculum to master. The rhetoric of impartiality and egalitarian classical ideals successfully suppressed the reality of the unequal chances of candidates in the civil service. Success on the civil examinations evolved as a prerogative of the wealthy and powerful in local communities. In the contest for local quotas and examination success, artisans, peasants, and clerks were poorly equipped to take advantage of the alleged openness of the civil service. During the late empire, less than 2 percent of the total population achieved gentry status.⁴²

By 1400, there were some 30,000 licentiates out of an approximate population of 85 million, a ratio of almost one licentiate per 2,800 persons.⁴³ In 1700, this increased to 500,000 licentiates in a total population of 268 million, or a ratio of one licentiate per 540 persons. Although the ratio of licentiates to population became less competitive over time, the likelihood of licentiates passing higher examinations entitling them to civil appointments became more formidable. In fact, in Qing times, licentiate status was much less rare or special and had become a social necessity, like a college degree today, to remain a member of the elite.⁴⁴

Beginning in the fifteenth century, each stage of the Ming civil service selection process eliminated the vast majority of candidates, and the odds for success in all stages of the selection process were perhaps only slightly better than one in 6,000 (0.01 percent) during the Qing. As the population increased, however, the increasing roll of potential candidates for a much more fixed number of metropolitan, provincial, and local positions (20,400 civil positions circa 1500; 24,680 circa 1625)⁴⁵ meant that the vast majority of licentiates who were never appointed to a position could pose a local security problem, both in terms of unfulfilled expectations leading to rebellion or unscrupulous manipulation of fiscal tax exemptions from the required labor service. Officials also feared that an overproduction of licentiates could produce heterodox views of literati learning and weakening of local paternalism. The main audience for

Wang Yangming's new views of "Way learning" was the community of licentiates in the sixteenth century who were sympathetic to his criticism of Cheng-Zhu teachings and unhappy with the increasingly competitive examination market that enshrined them.⁴⁶

There were good reasons that provincial and metropolitan examination compounds looked more like prisons than schools. Unlike contemporary Europe and Japan, where aristocratic values prevailed, landed affluence and commercial wealth during the Ming and Qing dynasties were intertwined with examination status, thereby releasing some of the potential for class-based revolt in China. But the keen competition had to be policed, if the system was to remain credible.

Provincial Graduates as a New Political Group

Competition for both the civil provincial and palace degrees increased dramatically after 1450 and for the first time reached Song dynasty civil examination competition levels.⁴⁷ Residualism, that is, repeated failures, became a typical feature of the "examination life." The number who failed in Ming provincial examinations empire-wide had risen from 850 per examination in 1441, to 3,200 in 1495, and then to 4,200 in 1573, a fourfold increase in 132 years.⁴⁸ The levels of competition in provincial civil examinations during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries increased so much that a late Ming popular song in the Yangtze delta declared that in Nanjing (Yingtian) provincial examinations "gold went to the provincial graduate [*juren*], and [only] silver to the palace graduate [*jinshi*]," because the competition was much keener in provinces.⁴⁹ By 1630, about 49,200 candidates empire-wide, 45 percent less than in the "High Qing," triennially competed for 1,278 provincial degrees. Only 2.6 percent would succeed

During the Qing dynasty, approximately two million candidates registered for county licensing and qualifying examinations held twice every three years. Of these only 30,000 (1.5 percent) achieved licentiate status.⁵⁰ Some 89,600 is a conservative estimate for the total number of eligible provincial degree candidates in all seventeen provinces before 1850, of whom less than 1,300 (1.5 percent) passed.⁵¹ A new social dynamic in Ming times resulted. Before the Ming, if a candidate failed the

capital and palace level of tests, he returned home and had to start over again.⁵² In the early Ming, this requirement was changed to permit provincial graduates to maintain their hard-earned degree status. They automatically qualified for future metropolitan civil examinations, in addition to remaining eligible for lower-level official appointments. They were also allowed to enter the Imperial School (*Guoxue*, later called *Guozijian*) to continue their progress toward the palace degree.⁵³

For the first time, a provincial class of degree-holders emerged during the Ming with its own special social status and political prerogatives with three main divisions: (1) second-class provincial graduates (*fubang*) who qualified for local educational posts; (2) provincial graduates who entered the Imperial School to continue their studies and thus were eligible for possible lower-level appointments; and (3) provincial graduates who returned to their home areas to prepare for the next palace examinations. Because of the increasing importance of the palace degree, provincial graduates preferred to take their chances at the metropolitan examination rather than serve in a minor capacity. This suggests that only at the highest levels was a career in government acceptable to the wealthiest elites. Many literati who had the means preferred to stay at home rather than enter the lower stream of candidates in the Imperial School.⁵⁴

The failure of the school system to gain an independent status went back to the early Ming. Most school students opted to follow the examination path for advancement, with local dynastic schools a venue of last resort. Because dynastic schools became part of the examination system and were not independent, Imperial School students received no social or political benefits that were commensurate with the palace examination track. Consequently, many provincial graduates opted for the civil examinations rather than wait in the Imperial School system for an official appointment. Schools simply became testing centers.⁵⁵

Seasonal and monthly examinations were administered in dynastic schools to check the progress of licensed students. Foreigners or Chinese from abroad, principally from the Ryukyu Islands, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Siam (Thailand), were also permitted according to the terms of the tributary system to study in dynastic schools as tribute students. Although Chinese candidates continued to take advantage of the

recommendation, inheritance, and purchase provisions of the selection and appointment process, most high-level civil officials in Ming and Qing China drew on their success in local, provincial, and metropolitan examinations, particularly after 1459, when the Ming dynasty abolished the recommendation process.⁵⁶ Unlike the Song, when hereditary statuses compromised the fairness of the degree market,⁵⁷ in Ming times, inheritance only ensured the holder access to a minor position.⁵⁸

So important were examination credentials that by the Jiajing reign (1522–1557), education in dynastic schools counted for little if the student failed to pass the higher civil examinations. Doomed to lives as minor functionaries, students who remained in dynastic schools had little chance for success in imperial politics. By the late Ming, candidates who got only as far as the provincial degree found it difficult to gain reputable government positions.⁵⁹

Early in the Ming dynasty, provincial degree-holders had been conspicuous in administration, but they were eventually displaced by the increasing number of palace degree-holders.⁶⁰ Of the three routes of career advancement, namely, palace graduates, provincial graduates, and clerical officials (*liyuan*) chosen locally for yamen service, the palace degree became the sole guarantee of high political position and elite social esteem.⁶¹ Although many palace graduates held high office in the central and provincial bureaucracy, after 1500 most were appointed to local positions as magistrates, prefects, and various levels of yamen aides. Particularly after 1574, palace degree-holders tended to become prefects or magistrates.

Education Officials in Flux

Provincial graduates initially also served as prefecture, county, and department education officials, which entitled them to act as provincial examination officials in the early and mid-Ming. Because of their length and complexity, the triennial provincial and metropolitan examinations in particular required a full complement of examination officials to administer. Although examination officials had been important since medieval times, the full bureaucratization of education and examination officials from the county to the metropolitan and palace levels was not formalized until the middle of the fifteenth century.⁶²

Under provincial education commissioners, Ming local education officials were placed in charge of dynastic schools. If we use late Ming figures (140 prefectures, 193 departments, and 1,138 counties), then empire-wide there were 1,471 instructors and 3,415 assistant instructors at the local level (not counting education officials in Ming garrison schools), who were supervised by education commissioners in thirteen provinces and the two capital regions in Nanjing and Beijing.⁶³ In 1385, all provincial graduates who had failed the metropolitan examination were appointed as instructors in local schools, indicating that the provincial degree was still appropriate for education officials. In addition, during the early Ming it was not considered unusual to appoint palace degree-holders as local education officials. By the mid-fifteenth century, however, ambitious literati saw education positions as dead ends.⁶⁴

In the late sixteenth century, local education officials were significantly down classed, and palace graduates dominated most prestigious appointments of metropolitan, provincial, and local significance. They were increasingly appointed as magistrates and prefects, but palace graduates also took over most appointments as education commissioners, the only education appointment that survived the sharp drop in status of local education officials. Even provincial graduates avoided low-level education appointments so that they could continue to compete for the palace degree.

To fill education positions that elites no longer wanted, the Ming government began in 1450 to appoint annual “tribute students” (*suigong*) as local education officials. This solved the problem of finding local men to take the positions but down classed the positions to the lower level of the civil service.⁶⁵ Many attacked the bankruptcy of Ming local education officials.⁶⁶ The implication was that Ming education officials were unworthy of their titles. Not until the Yongzheng emperor’s reign (1723–1735) would there be another attempt to improve the examination standing and institutional efficacy of local education officials (see Chapter 6).⁶⁷

Displacement of Provincial Graduates

Selection of civil examination officials during the Ming generally followed a down-classing trend. As of 1465, lower degree-holders, especially provincial graduates, stood a good chance of appointment as edu-

cation officials and as provincial examiners. This pattern for provincial examinations remained in place until about 1585. Up to then most of the chief and associate examiners appointed to civil provincial examinations after 1465 were chosen from the pool of 4,200 education officials assigned to dynastic schools throughout the empire (eliminating by law of avoidance those who came from the province in which the examination took place). Most of them held provincial degrees.⁶⁸ The pre-1585 Ming practice of provincial graduates first becoming education officials and then serving as outside chief and associate provincial examiners meant that local palace degree-holders were often placed under provincial degree-holders in the examination compound. In 1549, many palace graduates still served as clerks, collectors, and sealers while provincial graduates occupied all ten places as chief and associate examiners.⁶⁹ Similarly in 1567, associate examiners were outside provincial graduates.⁷⁰

After 1585, the policy for selecting provincial examiners changed. In 1583, for instance, the Wanli, emperor (r. 1573–1619) assigned Hanlin academicians from the capital as chief examiners in provincial examinations, signaling that the court wished to exert more direct control in the provinces. Previously, Hanlin members were assigned chiefly to metropolitan and palace civil examinations and generally only to the provincial examinations in the capital prefectures.⁷¹ The number of palace graduates selected as chief and associate examiners went up dramatically between 1585 and 1594. By the last years of the Ming, palace degree-holders had displaced provincial graduates as the vast majority of examiners in provincial examinations.

Consequently, three processes were operating politically and socially in Ming times after 1585: (1) palace graduates were replacing provincial degree-holders as chief and associate examiners on provincial examinations; (2) outside prefects and magistrates were replacing outside dynastic school instructors as the key provincial examiners; (3) competition levels for provincial degrees were becoming so intense that only 2–3 percent of the candidates could expect to pass. Because of their increasing numbers, palace degree-holders took over most high-level positions as prefects and magistrates in the Ming bureaucracy. Palace graduates also took control of the selection of provincial candidates. Before 1585, provincial degree-holders serving as education officials and examiners

selected their peers. By the end of the Ming, they were displaced from positions of power and influence by palace degree-holders, a social down classing that carried over into the Qing dynasty.

Generalized down classing of provincial degree-holders and education officials represented a major change in the social conditions of political recruitment from 1600 to 1900. Even palace degrees were eventually stigmatized by reformers in the early twentieth century. The precipitous increase in Ming civil examination candidates, based in part on commercial development and population growth, devalued all but the highest palace degrees for high-level appointments. A product of this political down classing of provincial graduates was the increasing disparity between individual and family expectations for lower degree-holders and their realistic political opportunities. Of the 24,680 positions in the late Ming bureaucracy, the top ones as ministers, governors, education commissioners, or prefects and magistrates were taken by palace degree-holders. The remainder were left for provincial graduates, tribute students, and recommended licentiates.

After 1600, fewer provincial graduates achieved political success. They lowered their expectations and took advantage of the surviving benefits of their lowered status to take jobs as local functionaries. For many, a provincial degree became an end in itself, a required way station on the road toward the coveted palace. These fifteenth- and sixteenth-century developments shattered the early Ming youthful dreams of millions of candidates and made them realize that the likelihood of success was for a very few. The social and legal benefits licentiates and provincial graduates received, except for briefly in the 1720s, compensated them for their degrees despite their increasing exclusion from higher public office, but at a great psychological cost. The pressures of failure produced personal and family anxieties that were expressed in dreams and nightmares that Ming and Qing elites recorded and commented on with curiosity and dread (see Chapter 5).

Changes in Metropolitan and Palace Examination Officials

An eventual overabundance of palace graduates in the late Ming examination market, which had generated provincial down classing, also neg-

actively affected palace degree-holders who passed in the second or third tier of palace graduates. Initially, those who finished in the first or at the top of the second tier entered the Hanlin Academy and served as the emperor's secretaries. The few who were appointed as metropolitan examiners in the period from 1371 to 1415 served as the chief examiners. After 1478, however, Hanlin academicians usually comprised 80 percent or more of the positions as both chief and associate metropolitan examiners.

The policy change favoring Hanlin members as associate examiners came at the expense of education officials taking such posts and was put into practice for the 1454 metropolitan examination.⁷² Later in 1527, the policy of appointing Hanlin academicians was applied to chief examiners in the provincial civil examinations. In 1504 such positions were upgraded from provincial education officials to palace degree-holders. After 1523, most provincial examiner served as lower-level paper collectors, sealers, copyists, or proofreaders.⁷³

The Hanlin "club" of highest-ranking palace degree-holders was by the sixteenth century firmly in control of the key examiner positions in the palace and metropolitan examinations. They were also increasingly appointed chief examiners in provincial examinations. During the Qing, Hanlin academicians were also appointed as associate examiners for provincial civil examinations, thus taking complete charge of provincial and palace selection in the name of the imperial court and Ministry of Rites. Beginning in the sixteenth century, in sharp contrast with their lack of control of the booming Ming economy, the emperor and his inner court directly controlled the middle and top levels of the empire-wide examination market.⁷⁴

This trend accelerated in the early Kangxi era under the Qing dynasty, when the responsibilities of Hanlin academicians increased vis-à-vis the civil service and provincial education. Members of the Hanlin were now sent out as educational commissioners to the Beijing capital region in 1680 and to the Yangzi delta provinces of Zhejiang and Jiangsu in 1681. Hanlin academicians were also routinely assigned to monitor special "repeat" examinations for provincial graduates in the capital in 1699, before such graduates, typically from southern provinces, were allowed into the metropolitan examinations. In addition, the tradition of

assigning the palace *optimus* (*zhuangyuan*) to monitor provincial examinations began in 1669. Before then, the *optimus* usually served as an associate examiner on metropolitan examinations.⁷⁵

In Fujian province, those who had to make do with a provincial degree included the infamous Ming literatus Li Zhi (1527–1602) from Quanzhou prefecture, who finished twenty-second on the 1552 Fujian provincial examination. As one of 90 graduates out of 3,000 candidates (a pass rate of 3 percent), Li Zhi initially had been a third-class prefectoral school student whose family had purchased his student status for him, but his family's financial plight prevented him from ever taking the metropolitan or palace examination.⁷⁶

Known for his iconoclasm and criticism of “Way learning” orthodoxy late in his life, Li Zhi at the time of the 1552 provincial examination passed a conventional test at age twenty-five in which he demonstrated that he had mastered the required interpretations of the Classics that he would later attack. With only a provincial degree in hand, Li could not gain an important office, but in 1555 he was fortunate to get a post as a county director of studies in Henan province, one of the few appointments a provincial degree-holder could still aspire to in the sixteenth century. Later in 1561 he traveled to Beijing, where he waited for about two years for a place in the Imperial School, the last resort for unemployed provincial graduates, but he had to resign from that upon the death of his grandfather.⁷⁷

Li Zhi later held a series of minor positions in the Ministry of Rites in Beijing and Ministry of Justice in Nanjing. In 1578, he finally gained the post of prefect in Yunnan province, a position he resigned from after serving three years, effectively ending his undistinguished official career. A typical palace degree-holder qualified for the post of prefect early in his career. The trials and tribulations Li Zhi faced were characteristic of Ming provincial graduates, most of whom did not gain his level of fame or ignominy. Later in an essay entitled “Preamble to the Sages’ Teachings” (*Shengjiao xiaoyin*), Li described his student days:

I honored Confucius but did not know why Confucius deserved honor. I was “like a short man watching a play behind a tall man,”⁷⁸ who followed along with others’ research and simply chimed in.

Hence before I was fifty I was just like a hunting dog that started barking because other dogs were barking. If you asked why I was barking, I would be speechless and have to laugh at myself.⁷⁹

How hard was it to get the palace degree in Ming times? Fucheng city in Fuzhou prefecture, which ranked so high in aggregate figures, produced a total of 306 palace degree-holders from 1370 to 1546. Over those 176 years, however, the average number of its palace graduates was less than two annually. Approximately 1,227 provincial graduates came from there, or only seven a year. In Fujian, the celebrity status of palace degree-holders outpaced that of provincial graduates. Highly successful regions in the examination market usually kept records to document their prestige. This information was then included in local gazetteers and provincial records. Through 1636, Fujian could claim ninety-two Hanlin academicians in Ming times, with thirty-three Fujian palace degree-holders finishing among the top three in the palace examination and fifty-three finishing among the top five. Such records also highlighted family success.

Except for those who finished number one on the Fujian provincial examination, the examination records were strongly biased toward palace degrees. Fewer provincial successes were recorded, indicating how commonplace the degree had already become during the Ming dynasty. Palace degree-holders overall remained important enough to be recorded in most provincial gazetteers honoring local elites. Inclusion in gazetteers indicates that while examination records were biased toward palace graduates, local gazetteers still valorized provincial graduates and often included the names of licentiates in local communities.

Palace Degree-Holders and the Hanlin “Club”

Egalitarian selection of literati officials was cemented by a final palace examination the emperor administered. Since the Tang and Song, the emperor in effect was the premier examiner, symbolically demanding oaths of allegiance from successful candidates for public office. Beginning in the Ming, the ruler was acknowledged as a “Way learning” sage-king (see Chapter 1). Emperors learned as princes the classical rationale

for their legitimacy from Hanlin Academy tutors selected from the top finishers in civil examinations.⁸⁰

Absolute quotas for metropolitan civil examinations were not set, although the general number of successful palace graduates in a triennial examination was around 300–350 candidates after 1475. The quotas fluctuated widely, however, particularly during the volatile years of the early Ming. In 1385, for instance, only thirty-two palace degrees were approved, while 472 names appeared on the 1406 roll of graduates—the low and high for the Ming. Ping-ti Ho has estimated that during the entire Ming an average of eighty-nine (289 per examination) passed the metropolitan examinations per annum.⁸¹ After 1450 typically 3,000–4,000 provincial graduates competed triennially in the metropolitan examination for just 250–350 places. This meant that only 7.5–10 percent received palace degrees. After 1550, the number of candidates increased to between 4,500 and 4,700. With no significant changes in the number of palace graduates, the degree ratio declined to 6.4 percent in 1601. In the late Ming, over 62,000 provincial graduates competed for about 4,200 places on the fourteen metropolitan examinations held between 1549 and 1589. Competition in civil metropolitan examinations during the Qing dynasty, following long-term Ming-Qing demographic trends, increased by 100 percent in the eighteenth century, as success rates dropped further to 3.5 percent.⁸²

Not yet full members of the bureaucracy during the Tang and Song, Hanlin academicians initially served as personal advisers to the emperor, who chose them as much for their reputations as for their qualifications. During the Song dynasty, the functions of Hanlin academicians shifted from political to cultural affairs. In time, Hanlin scholars became involved in drafting documents for Song emperors. As private secretaries, Hanlin members used their proximity to the throne to garner political power from the bureaucracy. Hanlin readers were assigned to take charge of classical and historical lessons for the emperor and his princes. Although the Hanlin Academy had considerably diminished political influence under the Yuan dynasty, Hanlin appointees were still assigned to deal with cultural matters, particularly the preparation of Dynastic Histories.⁸³

Since 1385, the Hanlin Academy admitted the top-ranking palace graduates, a practice that was confirmed in 1404 by the Yongle emperor

when he selected twenty-nine palace graduates as Hanlin bachelors to serve in the court. Thereafter during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the top three were normally appointed as academicians, while the top twenty to forty were eligible to become lower-rank bachelors of the Academy.⁸⁴ Because it represented the most prestigious academic institution, as well as training ground for the highest echelon of officialdom, the Hanlin Academy was the key venue for palace graduates with honors to reach the forefront of the political world.⁸⁵

Under Ming civilian rule, the Hanlin Academy became a fully developed government institution. Its political functions increased under the Hongwu emperor after the purge and elimination of all executive offices in the bureaucracy. In the fifteenth century, Hanlin duties included supervision of palace, metropolitan, and provincial civil examinations, publication of literary works, work on special cultural projects such as the Yongle emperor's *Great Compendium* and "Great Collection Trilogy," classical and historical discussions with the emperor, and performance of temporary assignments as imperial envoys. When compared with their Tang and Song predecessors, the role of Ming Hanlin academicians in policy making declined. They increasingly became the Grand Secretaries (*Daxue shi*) who served as the emperor's executive agents presiding over the bureaucracy and examination market. After 1646, all top finishers on the preliminary metropolitan and provincial examinations, once they became palace graduates, could also enter the Hanlin Academy.⁸⁶

The views of Hanlin academicians and bachelors were the opinions of highly placed palace examination graduates, who had the ear of the emperor and inner court. They were destined to become officials with empire-wide impact. The Academy became an important stepping-stone to political influence in the court and bureaucracy at the apex of the civil examination process, and its cultural influence through appointees to the Ministry of Rites was significant.⁸⁷ An *optimus*, *secundus*, or *tertius* on the palace examination, for example, followed a career pattern typical of a Hanlin academician. This Ming-Qing pattern entailed close links between the Hanlin Academy, Ministry of Rites, and the Grand Secretariat. A Hanlin career represented the model for political advancement through complementary and overlapping governmental bodies. The compilers of the official *Ming History* noted: "Only palace graduates

could enter the Hanlin. Only Hanlin could enter the inner court. Only Hanlin could serve as ministers or vice-ministers of Rites in the north and south, or as ministers of the rites in the Personnel [Ministry].”⁸⁸

Until the early eighteenth century, when the Manchu inner court insulated itself from both the Hanlin Academy and the Ministry of Rites by creating the Grand Council (*Junji chu*), the Hanlin Academy lay at the heart of the political partnership between the court and the bureaucracy.⁸⁹ After 1380, the Grand Secretariat increasingly coordinated and supervised the six ministries, and the Ministry of Rites, because it straddled the middle ground between inner and outer echelons of power, also became more important. When later Ming emperors, especially during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, delegated much of their authority to members of the inner court, the close links between the Grand Secretariat and Ministry of Rites produced career patterns of major political and institutional consequences not only for the Ming but also for the Qing bureaucratic system.

A majority of Ming Grand Secretaries originated from the Ministry of Rites.⁹⁰ Most Grand Secretaries were also members of the Hanlin Academy early in their official careers. During the Ming dynasty, for example, 75 percent (124) of all (165) Grand Secretaries were members of the Hanlin Academy.⁹¹ Moreover, Ping-ti Ho has shown that 109 of these Grand Secretaries (66 percent) also served in the Ministry of Rites and that 93 of the latter (56 percent) went directly from the Ministry of Rites to the Grand Secretariat.

In a typical Ming bureaucratic career, a successful palace graduate (normally with high honors) was first appointed to the Hanlin Academy, where he served the court as a compiler, editor, provincial examiner, or as personal secretary to the emperor. From there he served in a variety of positions but eventually became a fixture in the Ministry of Rites, often as a palace or metropolitan examination official. The Ministry of Rites then served as a springboard for promotion to the Grand Secretariat, which until the early eighteenth century remained the highest advisory body in the bureaucratic apparatus.⁹²

Top palace graduates were guaranteed entry into the Hanlin Academy, although others were chosen for other reasons. For example, between 1646 and 1659 all first-place finishers on the metropolitan exami-

nation were automatically placed in the Hanlin Academy regardless of their finish on the palace examination. Later, those who finished first on the provincial examinations were honored this way as well. From 1673 until 1685, if the same person finished first on both the palace and metropolitan examinations, then all first-place finishers on the provincial examinations for that year's palace competition entered the Hanlin Academy.⁹³

Those Hanlin bachelors who did well in the academy's initial three-year program took a special examination that tested classical erudition and rhyme-prose. Although belles lettres had been eliminated from the regular examinations since the early Ming, they were still the mainstay of the Hanlin examinations. If bachelors did well on this Hanlin examination, the Academy retained them as compilers. If not, they were "released into officialdom" from the Academy to take up appointments in the central bureaucracy or as local officials. Either way, their time in the Academy enabled them to become the elite of palace degree-holders. Members of this exclusive club became a special community from which candidates for the Ming and Qing dynasties' most important positions were drawn.⁹⁴

Chinese and Manchus

The Manchu regime reinstated the Ming civil and military service system soon after the Qing dynasty was formed in Beijing in 1644. Following Ming precedent, the fourfold division of the selection and evaluation process for officials remained: schools, examinations, recommendation, and appointment.⁹⁵ Important changes, especially in the schooling system for the enlarged empire, were made, however. In addition to the Imperial School system, special dynastic schools were established for the eight military banners (composed of Manchus, Mongols, and Chinese military families) as well as a school for the Manchu imperial family.⁹⁶ The court already initiated examinations for Manchus, Mongols, and Chinese banners in their native languages in Manchuria in 1634, after establishing a Ming-style bureaucracy in 1627.⁹⁷

The touchy issue of Manchu-Han relations was raised by the regent Dorgon (1612–1650) and other advisers of the then eight-year-old Shunzhi

emperor (r. 1644–1662), in the very first Qing dynasty palace examination in 1646. The emperor's regent wanted the dynasty to bring Manchu and Han officials and people together for a common purpose. The dynasty's first *optimus* replied that Manchus and Chinese would work together to improve the new dynasty, if that initiative derived from a sagely ruler who understood that “the order of the two emperors and three kings was based on the Way, and their Way was based on the mind,” a “Way learning” moral mantra that Ming literati had long since fashioned into orthodoxy (see Chapter 1).⁹⁸

In the 1649 palace examination, the emperor inquired about how best to deal with Manchu versus Han Chinese quotas on civil examinations. He asked the metropolitan graduates to describe “how Manchus and Han Chinese could be unified so that their hearts were the same and they worked together without division.” The top answer by the second of the *optimi* under the Qing argued for cultural unity instead of a special palace quota for Manchu versus Han candidates. Cultural unity was again defined in light of the moral cultivation of “Way learning.” The essay applied the long-standing distinction drawn between northern and southern literati to the differences between Manchus and Chinese: “I would say that the Manchus stress substance, so we should use culture to complement this trait. Han people emphasize culture, so we should use substance to complement that.” A revised stereotype emerged defining Manchus as moral northerners and Han Chinese as cultured southerners.⁹⁹

The Manchu conquest elite initially felt that northern Chinese were more reliable subjects than southerners. In Shandong province, nineteen of eighty-five (22 percent) provincial graduates in 1639 and thirty-one of ninety (34 percent) provincial degree-holders in 1642, the last two Ming provincial examinations in the province, went on to take their palace degrees under Manchu auspices. The Qing regime was anxious to accommodate such crossovers. In the 1646 metropolitan examination, for example, 53 percent of the Shandong provincial graduates from the previous year's Qing provincial examination passed and received palace degrees. The Qing policy of relying on northern collaborators, so successful in military and political terms after 1644, was also a feature of early Qing civil examinations.¹⁰⁰

The court also appointed civil examiners with great care. Manchu and Han bannermen were appointed chief examiners in metropolitan examinations ahead of non-banner Chinese. Most Ming palace degree-holders who were appointed as chief or associate examiners in metropolitan examinations continued to be selected from northerners until 1658, when there were enough loyal palace graduates under the Qing dynasty to fill the available positions in the examination bureaucracy. In 1649, for example, two southern examiners were appointed for the first time as metropolitan examiners. In 1658, all twenty-two chief and associate examiners were non-banner Han Chinese. Thirteen were 1655 palace graduates, and many of them were southerners.¹⁰¹

Similarly, the percentage of northerners serving as provincial examiners was very high (over 70 percent) in the initial 1645, 1646, and 1648 provincial examinations. From 1651 to 1660, however, the percentage of southern examiners slowly increased. The gradual revival of late Ming southern literati networks, after initial northern dominance, became clearer when southerners again dominated the palace rolls from 1647 to 1658.¹⁰² In the early Qing, a 40:60, Manchu to Han, quota was in effect for the palace examination, a ratio that was borrowed from the northern versus southern quotas of Ming times. In 1652 and 1655, separate civil metropolitan and palace examinations were held for Han Chinese and bannermen, but they were recombined in 1658. A ten-point quota of 4:2:4 (Manchu, Mongol, and Chinese) was set for bannermen seeking the palace degree in 1652 and 1655. After 1655, no Manchu or Mongol ever finished among the coveted top three palace graduates. Thereafter, Han examination officials were blamed (or praised) for never granting Manchus high rankings.¹⁰³

Special examinations for Manchu bannermen were established in 1651. Those Manchus who did not know classical Chinese were permitted to take the tests in Manchu. During the Kangxi reign, these special examinations were formalized into “translation examinations” at the provincial level for Manchus. Such privileges were extended to Mongols in 1735.¹⁰⁴ Initially, Manchu and Mongol translation examinations were administered in a single session with one question based on documentary style and another on an essay topic based on a quotation from either the Four Books or Five Classics. Later during the Qianlong reign, the

requirements were tightened, and Manchus and Mongols were encouraged to take examinations in classical Chinese to unite civilian and military training. Most Manchus still did not compete with the Chinese in provincial and metropolitan examinations. Additionally, translation examinations were required of Han Chinese in the specialized translation bureaus responsible for foreign affairs with Siam and the Islamic peoples in Turkestan. These were placed under the jurisdiction of the Hanlin Academy dating back to the early Ming. Later a Russian bureau was added.¹⁰⁵

In addition, Chinese who entered the Hanlin Academy were required to learn Manchu, a practice that began in 1647.¹⁰⁶ In 1688, a Chinese candidate from Hangzhou answered the policy question on the palace examination in both classical Chinese and Manchu. He was appointed as a compiler in the Hanlin Academy on the basis of his bilingual ability.¹⁰⁷ Special essay tests in Manchu and translation questions from classical Chinese to Manchu were administered to Hanlin academicians to ensure that documents and memorials were accurately recorded in the dual official languages.¹⁰⁸ In 1748, the Qianlong emperor reproached two Hanlin academicians for their poor performances in learning Manchu.¹⁰⁹

The Qing dynasty was also concerned that other minorities in the enlarged empire should receive appropriate attention in local educational affairs. The Peng people in Jiangxi province were incorporated as a minority group by the education commissioner in 1762 when he created a local quota for them, which allowed the Peng one place for each fifty candidates. Later, in 1763, the Jiangxi provincial governor argued for establishing local licentiate quotas for the Peng to encourage them to settle down and discard their nomadic pattern of life.¹¹⁰

Minority quotas, however, became the targets of Han people seeking local status in the southwest. In 1767, the Guangxi provincial education commissioner memorialized that in five prefectures Han Chinese were using the easier native quotas instead of their own more competitive quotas to become licentiates.¹¹¹ Similarly, in 1785 the governor-general in the Northwest memorialized on the need to establish schools for orthodox literati studies to flourish among Muslims. Fukang'an (d. 1796), who had helped lead Qing forces in Gansu successfully against Muslim sepa-

ratists in 1784, perceived the civil examinations as a way to incorporate Muslims into the empire's mainstream.¹¹²

Other frequent memorials and edicts dealt with the special requirements of the minorities in southwest China, described since the 1730s by the education reformer Chen Hongmou (1696–1771), when he served in Yunnan province.¹¹³ In an 1807 memorial, the provincial education commissioner in Hunan province requested that Miao candidates taking provincial examinations be granted quotas of their own so that they would not have to compete for places with Han Chinese. Li was quick to add, however, that local officials would have to be wary of those, notably Han Chinese, who would claim Miao heritage. Again, the goal was to assimilate the Miao via local quotas for the examinations into the literati mainstream.¹¹⁴

After setting higher provincial and palace quotas in the 1640s and 1650s, Manchu rulers deliberately set lower rolls in 1660 for local and provincial examinations in predominantly Chinese provinces. They perceived in late Ming high quotas the government's loss of control over gentry, merchant, and military families in local society. The total number of triennial provincial degree-holders was nearly cut in half between 1645 and 1700. The second-class provincial roll, which had padded local lists by up to 10 percent since Ming times, was abolished in 1662. Local quotas for licentiates were decreased to twenty in a large prefecture, fifteen in a large county, and only five in a small county.¹¹⁵

More stringent policies in education to regain control of the dynasty's human resources correlated with Manchu efforts in the 1660s to crack down on tax evasion by gentry families in the Yangzi delta and recover material resources for dynastic use. In addition, because of the large number of Manchus and Han bannermen in the central bureaucracy, fewer positions were available for civilian Han Chinese, although Manchu appointments were less conspicuous in provincial and local administration. The total number of palace degrees awarded triennially declined 61 percent, from a high of 399 in 1645 to 155 in 1667, and then declined another 30 percent to 109 in 1676, after briefly rising to 299 in 1670.¹¹⁶

Provincial quotas were more generous early in the Shunzhi reign when, for example, Jiangnan (Anhui and Jiangsu provinces) and the capital region of Shuntian were permitted over 160 graduates to compete

in the metropolitan examinations, up from 100 in the late Ming. In 1660, however, provincial quotas were drastically cut to about sixty in large provinces. Although gradually increased during the Kangxi reign (1662–1722), the numbers remained far below late Ming quotas, even though by 1700 the population in the empire reached some 300 million.¹¹⁷ As late as 1765, the Anhui provincial education commissioner memorialized the throne requesting an increase in provincial quotas for the Yangzi delta provinces and justified the request by indicating that local quotas for such a prosperous region were still too low.¹¹⁸

As in the Ming, no absolute limits were set on the number of metropolitan graduates permitted, although regional quotas remained in effect. In 1646, when 399 palace candidates graduated, 58 percent came from the South, 38 percent from the North, and 4 percent from central portions of the empire. These figures corresponded to the 55:35:10 regional ratios worked out during the Ming (see Chapter 1). Eventually, a ratio of 60:40, South to North, was worked out, with the quota for the central portions divided between them. Quotas were established for southwestern provinces, which the emperor doubled for the 1701 metropolitan examination.¹¹⁹

The number of metropolitan and palace examination graduates tended to be around 300 for the triennial examinations. Ping-ti Ho has calculated for the Qing that there were 239 graduates per examination (down fifty from the Ming) or approximately 100 per annum (up ten from the Ming). The number of annual graduates was actually higher during the Qing because of frequent special examinations, such as the “broad learning and extensive words” examinations of 1679 and 1736. In addition, the Manchu throne frequently deviated from the regular triennial schedule of examinations and scheduled “grace examinations” to commemorate the longevity of reigns or to celebrate imperial birthdays.¹²⁰

The structure and process of civil examinations that I have described should not be disaggregated from their educational, social, and political forms of practice. By understanding the long-term institutional aspects of civil examinations in Ming and Qing times, we learn how civil examinations successfully mobilized elites during the late empire and priori-

tized the “Way learning” domain of classical knowledge. We also see the increasing preeminence of a small number of palace degree-holders, who monopolized the upper levels of the imperial bureaucracy after 1580, at the expense of a vast number of provincial and local graduates, not to mention the millions of candidates for county examinations. The preeminence of palace graduates meant that the partnership between literati and the court was increasingly limited after 1600 to an exclusive group, usually from the wealthiest households and most elite lineages.

Members of the local elite who gained palace degrees evolved into an aristocracy of culture and status. In time, even the Song prestige of a palace degree was surpassed in the Qing examination market when in the late eighteenth century only 1 percent of the ever growing number of candidates could gain even the lesser provincial degree. Most literati, then, had to deal with examination failure, and such failures produced a variety of forms of resistance to the examination regime, as we will see in Chapter 5.

In Chapter 4, I will explore the social dynamics of civil examinations that grew out of their political and cultural construction. Examination compounds represented a venue of struggle and compromise between imperial and literati interests. The career goals of provincial and palace degree-holders represented the pinnacle of a pyramid of success and failure that had at its base a series of county, department, and prefectural yamen halls and provincial testing compounds. These examination sites conveyed successful graduates up the ladder of success, leaving the rest to tread water. The sites also delivered imperial power and influence downward to local towns and communities.

Classical Literacy in Late Imperial China

CLASSICAL LITERACY played a central role in late imperial China. As the official language of the bureaucracy, it helped to define social status in Chinese society until 1905. Given the absence of any “public” schools in Ming-Qing times, the social and geographical origins of civil examination graduates correlate quite closely with private education in lineage schools, charity and temple schools, or at home. In such venues, young men acquired the classical training needed to pass local licensing and renewal examinations. Once licensed, a successful candidate entered local dynastic schools in counties, townships, or prefectures. An official place in dynastic schools was the typical stepping-stone to further success in provincial and metropolitan examinations, but an official school was more a way station than a place of study, much like the University of London in the mid-nineteenth century, when it was still an “examination university.”¹

In this chapter, I will focus on how gentry and merchant elites gained and monopolized the cultural resources to qualify for the civil service. The civil service bureaucracy presented the process of social selection as a test of literati merit. The educational requirement to master nonvernacular classical texts and “Way learning” teachings created a linguistic barrier between those licensed to compete in examination compounds and those who were excluded because they were classically illiterate.

Fully classically literate gentry-merchant elites in local society monopolized access to the imperial bureaucracy, and that monopoly generated intense public resistance.

Social Reproduction of Gentry Elites

Each dynasty required loyal officials to share power in the bureaucracy with the imperial court. Lacking alternative careers of comparable social status and political prestige, becoming an official took priority. Participants in the examination process translated the system into the most prestigious means to achieve personal, family, and lineage success. Such success, however, required substantial investments of time, effort, and training. For families, clans, and lineages, the process of political selection translated into targets of local opportunity for social reproduction. Those who could afford the financial and labor sacrifices (i.e., “investments”) to prepare young men for the examinations did so. The linkage between filial piety and examination success was exemplified in the historical record by sacrificing families and hard-working sons who passed the examinations and rewarded the support received from their elders. Careerism usually won out over individual idealism among those who occasionally had qualms over their social obligations to their parents versus their personal aspirations.²

The dynastic school system was already limited to candidates socialized through schooling and family traditions to speak Mandarin (*guan-hua*, i.e., the language of officials in the capitals of the empire) and to read and write classical Chinese. Presuming the ability of their students to read and write, dynastic schools were oriented toward examination preparation.³ Initial stages in training a son for the civil service became the private responsibility of lineages seeking to attain or maintain elite status as gentry. Civil examinations represented the focal point through which imperial interests, family strategies, and individual hopes and aspirations were redirected.

Clear boundaries were erected in elite families to demarcate male education from female upbringing. Women were barred from the examination compounds (except in novels and stories where they posed as men), even though this practice was only culturally enforced and never legally

questioned. Many women were literate since Song times,⁴ but this gender split in family literacy remained intact until the seventeenth century, when education of women in elite families became more widespread. Many elite sons, whose fathers were away from home while serving as state officials, received their early classical lessons from their mothers.⁵ Education for men and women thus meant different things, although the differences were not absolute, especially among elites. A diffuse Han Chinese gender ideology granted boys competitive access via civil examinations to political, social, and economic leadership in society, while at the same time defining women in subordinate roles as wives, mothers, and matriarchs.⁶

Degree-holders again monopolized political and social prestige after 1450, while the uncredentialed, such as merchants, artisans, and peasants, were excluded from high office unless they gained, through testing or purchase,⁷ a lower degree. If a degree-holder never held office, he nonetheless enhanced his social status via labor tax benefits (exemption from *corvée* labor in the Ming) and legal privileges (commutation of punishments), which were important by-products of the selection and exclusion process. Even if higher-level provincial and metropolitan examinations were insurmountable hurdles, a young man who achieved county-level licentiate status sufficiently repaid his family's investment of resources for training.⁸

As well-organized kinship groups, local lineages were able to translate social and economic strength into civil service examination success, which in turn correlated with their dominant control of local cultural and educational resources. Education often trumped wealth or high office in perpetuating a patrilineal kinship group.⁹ Later, an increasing number of higher-order lineages, particularly dense in the South, required classically literate and highly placed leaders who moved easily in elite circles and could mediate on behalf of the kin group with county, provincial, and capital leaders. Such higher-order lineages were built around corporate estates uniting a set of component local lineages. Economic surpluses produced by such wealthy lineages, particularly in the prosperous Yangzi delta, enabled members of powerful segments of such lineages to have better access to a classical education and success

on civil examinations, which in turn led to enhanced political and economic power outside the lineage.¹⁰

For example, two powerful lineages, the Zhuangs and Lius in Changzhou prefecture, Jiangsu province, were able to foster sufficient educational resources during the Ming and Qing dynasties for the wider socialization of their children in the official vernacular, particularly when as officials their families lived in other provinces. At the same time they provided more rigorous schooling at home for both boys and girls in the required classical canon than most families. The success of their young men on civil examinations from 1600 to 1800 was extraordinary, but it was based on a typical sociocultural pattern.

Lineages like the Zhuangs and Lius built on the financial, social, and political advantages their complex kinship organizations provided. This resulted in intermarriage strategies between their two successful lineages and increased corporate investments in tax-exempt lineage land. They were typical of literati families empire-wide in their use of their financial resources and charitable estates to further their educational strategies. The translation of their greater economic assets into superior educational resources was the underlying reason why the two lineages became an affinally related “professional elite” whose success in the imperial bureaucracy in the eighteenth century, although unprecedented, was copied by many families.¹¹

In Huizhou, Anhui province, for instance, the leadership of local lineages slowly devolved by late Ming times into the hands of members of the lineage who had achieved licentiate status. Unable to attain public office with just a lower-level degree, local degree-holders increasingly became the *de facto* managers of their lineage estates.¹² Economic surpluses produced by wealthy lineages, particularly in the prosperous Yangzi delta, enabled members of rich segments of such lineages to gain access to a classical education and success on civil examinations, which in turn led to sources of political and economic power outside the lineage.¹³

Success required economic resources to provide for the protracted education of male members of the lineage in ancient versions of classical Chinese. Many “higher-order” lineages in the Yangzi delta, Zhejiang, and Fujian had inherent local advantages for future social and political

advancement: they came from a family with a strong tradition of classical scholarship; and they had Mandarin-speaking credentials as a result of office-holding men in the family. Education was not simply a marker of social status. Within a broader society of illiterates and those only semi-literate or “primer-literate” in vernacular Chinese or other regional dialects, control of the spoken word in official life and the written word in classical documents had social and political advantages.

Gentry in Fujian province, for instance, maintained an “education orientation,” in addition to a family and lineage orientation, to execute their private responsibilities in the provision of educational resources. They thereby maintained their local dominance. Evidence from Fujian and Taiwan during the Qing dynasty indicates that families of modest means also established tax-exempt trusts to foster education and examination success. When a family had sufficient assets, they set aside income to support young men in the family in their quest for a civil or military degree. The amount set aside to each son was higher if he competed for advanced degrees such as provincial and palace titles and substantially less for licentiates.

A 1797 Fujian family contract related how families there decided upon the death of the father to establish an educational trust by investing what remained from the personal retirement trust after paying funeral expenses. The contract stated: “We feel that study can raise social status and that such honors can bring glory to our ancestors. . . . The educational trust is designed to encourage the grandchildren to succeed [in the examinations] in order to become officials above and bring honor to our homes below.” Individual families were expected to provide support for childhood training. Educational trusts were designed to entice adult males to compete for the provincial and metropolitan examinations. Provincial and palace degree-holders, moreover, received the added trust income for the rest of their lives, although they could not pass that income on to their children. When the educational property of the family was divided, not only the income of the educational trust was divided among the sons but so were the books, rooms, and other assets.¹⁴

Because civil examinations captured the fancy of ambitious men and their families, a defining characteristic for elite status became examination success. Social advantages translated into academic advantages via

“cultural resources” (what Pierre Bourdieu calls “symbolic capital”).¹⁵ Wealth provided the resources for adequate linguistic and cultural training that legitimated and added to the prestige of a successful examination candidate. Once legally enfranchised, merchant families also saw in the civil service the route to greater wealth and more orthodox success. Required for long-term lineage prestige, success on the imperial examinations and subsequent office holding conferred direct power and prestige on those most closely related to the graduate. The flow of local prestige went further afield by following diverse agnatic routes within the lineage and among affines, if one married into a lineage that had traditionally monopolized local examination quotas.¹⁶

Merchants, artisans, and other commoners frequently lacked access to the proper linguistic training and educational facilities for mastering literati political and moral discourse. To address this problem, local elites increasingly created “charitable schools,” some within but most outside lineages. Such schools represented the intermingling of gentry charitable institutions, elementary education, and local philanthropy, which complemented “community schools” set up by the dynasty to deliver instruction to deserving local commoners. In such semiofficial charitable institutions, an elementary student from a poor family or one from a poorer segment of a well-off lineage could gain “primer literacy.” Buddhist temple schools also fulfilled this function. Typically the curriculum in temples was divided between Buddhism for beginners and more advanced, examination-oriented instruction.

Lineage-endowed schooling also provided more opportunities for the advancement of lesser families in the lineage than would have been possible where lineages were not prominent. Corporate descent groups as a whole benefited from any degree-holding member of the lineage, no matter how humble in origins. Accordingly, the failure of single families in a lineage to maintain their status as degree-holders for several generations could be offset by the academic success of other agnates or affines. The social circulation of lineages, when taken as a corporate whole, was thus distinct from that of individual families.¹⁷

Dominant lineages and nouveau riche merchant families in the culturally ascendant Yangzi delta or Fujian maintained their high local status through the superior facilities they provided for their talented male

children. Lineage schools and merchant-financed academies (in Yangzhou, for example, academies were established by salt merchants for their sons) became jealously guarded private possessions, and local elites competed with each other for social, political, and academic ascendancy. Successful corporate estates thus played a central role in perpetuating an economic and political environment in which gentry and merchants, once legally enfranchised, were dominant. The rhetoric of kinship translated into local philanthropy and favored those already entrenched in local society.¹⁸

Artisan or peasant families generally could not afford the luxury of years of training for their sons in a classical language somewhat divorced from vernacular grammar and native speech. The occasional poor student who toiled in the fields riding a water buffalo by day and read by oil lamp late into the night in order to pass the examinations was celebrated precisely because he was rare. Though open to all, the content of the civil service competition linguistically excluded over 90 percent of China's people from the first step on the ladder to success. Unequal social distribution of linguistic and cultural resources based on a classical curriculum meant that those families with limited traditions of literacy could not compete successfully in the degree market with those whose traditions embraced classical literacy. The examinations in effect tested the merits of young men mainly from literati or merchant backgrounds.¹⁹

Rare successes by humble candidates helped mystify the examination process. The educational mortality of the lower classes was legitimated by obtaining from them (with the exceptions of militant Daoists and Buddhists) the admission that a classical education represented legitimate grounds for the examination success of literati. Those commoners who were legally eligible but linguistically excluded from the selection process were expected to acknowledge that their lesser fates were due to their lack of classical training. Classically trained elites in turn blamed the classically illiterate for their ignorance.

Social Advantages among Gentry

Social circulation in late imperial China mainly occurred among those who had the cultural and linguistic resources to prepare their sons for

the rigors of an “examination life” based on memorization of ancient texts in archaic classical Chinese. Edward Kracke and Ping-ti Ho estimated that officials whose immediate male ancestors had commoner status for at least three generations before they passed the metropolitan examinations comprised 53 percent, 49.5 percent, and 37.6 percent, respectively, of the Song, Ming, and Qing palace degree-holders they studied. Recent studies suggest that these declining figures in social “mobility” remain inflated because they undervalue those commoners who had officials as relatives from collateral lines in a lineage or from affinal ties to other families. Such collaterals or affines could be decisive in determining the likelihood of academic success of those who seem at first sight to be commoners.²⁰

The anonymous character of civil examinations persuaded rulers, elites, and commoners of the viability of the literati dream of public success, thereby misrepresenting its actual consequence, the nightmare of failure. As a meritocratic institution demanding anonymity for provincial and metropolitan test papers and a process that limited the arbitrary privilege of hereditary transfer of social and political status, the examination system diverted attention from the *de facto* elimination that took place via language credentials prior to examinations. Measurement of social mobility through examinations contains an unforeseen trap. By isolating those who were graduates from the larger pool of examination candidates and then reconstructing the social backgrounds only of the former, we are left with a skewed population of “survivors.” It would be more useful to stress the role of examinations in creating a broad class of classically literate males that included all who competed in the selection process, including the failures. The gatekeeping function of the civil examinations was an unspoken social consequence of the selection process.²¹

The social neutrality of the dynasty was a fiction (the court and its literati were bureaucratic partners), and the cultural autonomy of private schools and academies (as long as they did not meddle in politics) was illusory. Using classical learning as the criterion for exclusion, the elimination process was more thorough the less advantaged the social class. The Ming court recognized this as a regional phenomenon but tried only to redress the advantages southern elites had over their northern

counterparts (see Chapter 1).²² Those who could not meet the minimal requirements for passing even the lowest-level examinations were not randomly distributed among the different social classes in Ming-Qing society. Families dependent on the productive labor of sons in agriculture, crafts, and trade could not provide them with the years of training needed to keep up in the multitiered examination process. Moreover, many poorer literati who were burdened with *corvée* responsibilities in tax or grain collection could not compete in the examination market either.²³

Excluding peasants, artisans, clerks, and Buddhist and Daoist priests—not to mention all women—from the licensing stage of the selection process ensured that those who competed in the competition were a minority of young men from literati or merchant families, lineages, or clans with sufficient linguistic and cultural resources to invest in educating their male children. The gentry's monopoly of the cultural and linguistic resources required by the dynasty enabled families of wealth and power to continue to monopolize those resources over several generations. The hereditary transmission of cultural resources during the Ming and Qing replaced the medieval hereditary transmission of official status during the Tang and Northern Song.²⁴

Social Origins of Examination Graduates

In the early Ming, the Hongwu emperor ordered the Ministry of Revenue to complete a registration of all households in the realm. The registers contained household and population records, and the land survey comprised maps and books. Tax quotas were established in 1381 for each county and prefecture. Revised in 1391, this massive undertaking aimed at measuring the economic and military resources under Ming control, equalizing the distribution of the land tax (paid in kind), and obtaining fair labor services from all households. The register reflected the dynasty's assessment of its total material and labor resources. Similarly, lineages writ small assessed their cultural resources in light of their total material wealth.²⁵

The Ming dynasty measured access to the civil and military examinations via official classifications of the entire population into social and economic categories. These classifications dividing households into

commoners, military men, artisans, merchants, and so forth reflected the initial status of each family in local society and how much labor service they had to provide. Each household category was assigned a specific labor service to perform for the bureaucracy, and these tasks were organized according to the village-family units of 110 households (*lijia*) in each community. A merchant household was expected to supply merchandise or goods on demand, a military family had to provide at least two soldiers for service, an artisan household provided one worker for imperial workshops, and so on.²⁶

The land registers were supposed to be revised every ten years, and each family was required to perform its labor service in perpetuity. The wide gap between the theory and practice of tax collection widened over time, thereby greatly diminishing the dynasty's control of the economy by the sixteenth century. When regional markets gradually turned to a silver currency whose sources were global and thus out of the direct control of the government, this weakened the dynasty's hold over its agrarian tax resources.²⁷ The tax system became increasingly obsolete as the Ming population rose from 65 to 250 million and the Ming economy became more commercialized. By 1600, the Ming government promulgated the "Single Whip Reforms," which allowed the land tax and service labor systems to be commuted into a single payment in silver. The early Ming classifications of the entire population into social categories remained on the ledgers but were not enforced.²⁸

Each family member's standing in the legal system and social status in the civil and military examinations were also recorded based in part on these social classifications. The Ming dynasty enfranchised sons of merchants for the first time to participate in the examination process, while the so-called mean peoples were not (see the Introduction). The goal was to classify individuals in families according to their initial social standing when the dynasty had come to power. In the eighteenth century, the Manchu court's emancipation of labor belatedly invalidated Ming classifications demarcating society.²⁹

Although not a caste system because it did not legally enforce social statuses, the Ming hereditary categories of official, scholar, commoner, merchant, military, or artisan families meant that Ming candidates for officialdom were classified according to the original occupations of their

families, even when their immediate parents no longer pursued that occupation.³⁰ Such social classifications described a person's official hereditary lot (*fen*) and local status but often were out of date because of social circulation (see Chapter 8). Nevertheless, the information was duly recorded in all documents that permitted sons of eligible families to take licensing examinations. As they proceeded up the "ladder of success," those who came from eligible families were still classified according to their family's social status in the labor service register, even when their families had entered the upper elite as literati. In other words, late imperial society was much more fluid than the Ming classification of its labor sources pretended it was, and early Ming social classifications by the late Ming were anachronistic—so much so, the succeeding Qing dynasty stopped keeping track of family status in its registration documents for civil examinations.³¹

By the eighteenth century, the *yin* privilege, whereby sons of officials could inherit their student ranking without taking any examinations, had receded in social importance when compared with the Song and Ming periods. Such appointments, when made, were confined to minor positions in the central government or appointments as subprefect or magistrate. In the early Qing, quotas were set in each province for merchant sons (not sons of commoners who had become merchants) to take the civil examinations. For every ten such places, only one graduate was allowed, although in the early years the quota was not reached.³²

In 1786, the Qing court reiterated that education officials should not distinguish between those from commoner or merchant families when deciding on admission to dynastic schools, solidifying a policy begun in the early Ming when sons of merchants were enfranchised.³³ After 1786, the examination papers of candidates for provincial examinations from merchant families were placed together with those of commoners.³⁴ What mattered in the Qing registration process was what official positions a candidate's family had held in the preceding three generations.³⁵

Concerning the social origins of provincial graduates from the late Ming to early Qing dynasty, we find about half were of commoner (*minji*) social origins, which meant that their families had not been classified as

upper elites in the early Ming. By 1550, however, many “commoners” actually were de facto part of the upper elite.³⁶ For instance, Wang Yang-ming (1472–1528), the renowned military general and moral philosopher of the mid-Ming, came from a Zhejiang family originally classified as “commoners,” but his father, Wang Hua (1453–1522), had been the palace examination *optimus* in 1481 and risen to become minister of personnel in 1507. Wang’s family had long been members of the local elite in Yuyao county in Ningbo prefecture in spite of their “commoner” status.³⁷

The number of provincial graduates from official, artisanal, and merchant families was extremely small. Although few families were officially categorized as “merchant” in the early Ming, by the sixteenth century, those engaged in trade and commerce were still classified according to their family’s early social status as commoners, military, or artisanal families. Interestingly, however, around 20 percent of the Ming provincial graduates came from military families (*junji*), whether or not their families were by the late Ming still occupied with military matters. Military officer families were also producing up to 5–7 percent of provincial degree-holders.

Comparable figures for the social origins of Ming palace graduates reveal that for the early Ming period, 76–83 percent came from commoner families, whereas for the early Qing, usually 55–64 percent were commoners. Those from special families constituted less than 10 percent, while over 25 percent of the palace degree-holders during the Ming were from military families. Usually another 3–4 percent were from military officer families that dated back to the early Ming. Under the Manchus, this group from military families was displaced by Qing bannermen and declined substantially. Graduates with military officer backgrounds also declined. Qing examinations records thereafter stopped keeping track of such information, in part because the Manchu banners became the new military elites.

These findings are confirmed by Ping-ti Ho’s analysis of palace graduates from special statuses during the Ming dynasty.³⁸ The military family category usually constituted between 17 percent and 31 percent of all Ming civil palace degree-holders. If we add those who came from military officer families, the percentage of Ming military families producing

palace graduates increased over time from 18 percent to 36 percent. It is noteworthy that only 160 Ming palace graduates (less than 1 percent) came from official “literati-scholar” (*ruji*) families (usually translated as “Confucians”), while in Ho’s pool of 22,577 Ming palace graduates about 14,500 (56–80 percent over time, 64 percent overall) usually came from commoner families. Commoners thus became the largest category of provincial and palace degree-holders, even though so-called commoners usually were already members of local literati elites.³⁹ Earlier research has underestimated the social status and fluidity of Ming military households. Changes in elite social status usually preceded examination success, which confirmed and heightened that status.⁴⁰

Elite households, such as the Zhuang lineage in Changzhou prefecture mentioned earlier, remained classified as commoner households despite their transition to the status of an upper gentry lineage in the late Ming. In the Ming, the Zhuangs produced a total of six palace degree-holders. In the Qing, the Zhuangs became a “super-lineage” that produced twenty-seven palace graduates and altogether ninety-seven degree-holders. Eleven Zhuangs entered the Hanlin Academy. As a combination of literati families of immense wealth and prestige, they remained technically a “commoner” lineage.⁴¹

The importance of military families, who were bequeathed land and wealth in the early Ming by thankful rulers, can be traced to the successful translation of their early economic resources as military families into sufficient educational resources for their sons to compete successfully in the examination market. In addition, military families relied on the Ming military examinations to maintain their social status, although many chose the civil examinations to gain higher status and civilian office. Many men from military households rose to high office in the central bureaucracy and several became Grand Secretaries.⁴²

At least one assigned member had to fulfill family tax obligations. But the official statuses used to classify and measure Ming civil service candidates were obsolete by 1600. This tells us how much had changed after 1400. There was now unprecedented occupational fluidity among merchants and gentry and thus substantial circulation of elites into the examination market.

Geographical Distributions of Examination Graduates

Despite quotas for local and provincial degrees and regional quotas for palace graduates, the Ming and Qing bureaucracies never offset the financial advantages that particular prefectures and counties in the South had. They could translate such advantages into superior educations for the examination market. In the Yangzi delta, for instance, Suzhou and Changzhou prefectures usually ranked first and second in the Nanjing provincial examinations, with Suzhou frequently taking as many as 20 percent of the places in the most competitive (“gold goes to the provincial graduate”) examinations. Although the first Ming emperor curtailed Suzhou’s preeminence in the late fourteenth century, Suzhou still produced fifty top-ranked palace graduates from the Tang to the late Qing. Of these, nine Suzhou *optimi* came during the Ming and twenty-six in the Qing. Nine times Suzhou took two of the top three places in the palace examination.⁴³

In the Northern Capital Region, local candidates competed with the sons of officials from other provinces for degrees. This flexible registration for children of officials was exploited by southerners until the loophole was limited during the Qing. The number of classically literate candidates was much higher than in the North.⁴⁴ During the early Qing, a sizable number of candidates from other provinces received their provincial degrees in Beijing. In 1654, graduates from four southern provinces (Jiangnan [Jiangsu and Anhui], Zhejiang, and Fujian) took 20 percent of the degrees in Shuntian metropolitan examinations; in 1657, they took 28 percent; and in 1660, 19 percent of the Northern Capital Region’s provincial quota went to candidates registered in the South. Outsiders made up a very small percentage of provincial graduates in the southern capital region of Nanjing during the Ming dynasty. The spillover of southern candidates to the examination in Beijing increased the South’s potential for palace degree-holders.

For the dynasty as a whole, men from Jiangsu province constituted 43 percent of all *optimi* in the Qing, with Suzhou accounting for over half of those, or 23 percent of all *optimi*. During the early Ming, candidates from Jiangxi and Zhejiang provinces outpaced Jiangsu in the palace degree-holder market. By the mid-Ming, the Yangzi delta led in producing

optimi. For both the Ming and Qing dynasties, more men from the Yangzi delta took the top places in the metropolitan and palace examinations. These trends are confirmed when we look at the provincial distribution of all Ming palace graduates for whom we have information (93 percent). The two Yangzi delta provinces of Jiangsu and Anhui, taken together as “Jiangnan” (lit., “South of the Yangzi”), ranked first in palace degree-holders from the mid-Ming (1473–1571) on, taking 16 percent of all places. Zhejiang finished second, taking 14 percent of the places, although it ranked first if the figures for Anhui were not added to Jiangsu. Thirty percent thus came from three provinces.

Jiangxi province, which had been so prominent during the Song-Yuan-Ming transition in both political and cultural life, produced 17 percent of palace graduates during the early Ming (1371–1472), ranking first in that century. During the mid-Ming, the percentage of Jiangxi palace degree-holders declined to 10 percent and for the late Ming fell further to 8 percent, less than half of its rate in the early Ming. Later, Jiangxi became a stronghold for Wang Yangming learning after Wang successfully led military campaigns between 1517 and 1519 against rebels there.⁴⁵

The decline of Jiangxi in cultural eminence accelerated during the Qing. Increased downward mobility in the late fifteenth century and greater emigration to other provinces lessened Jiangxi influence and played a part in the decline of bureaucratic recruitment from the province. Jiangxi men also became embroiled in political controversies that diminished their impact at court after 1450.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, the Yangzi delta provinces, because they hugged the southeast coastline and were home to the southern entrepôts along the Grand Canal, became the hub of late Ming commerce. A network of rivers, canals, and lakes linked the Yangzi River east and west and the Grand Canal north and south. Jiangnan took advantage of its strategic location in an interregional trading area linking north and south China to the middle and upper Yangzi regions. Jiangxi became a provincial backwater where fewer economic resources were translated into fewer educational resources for families and lineages.⁴⁷

During early Qing, high numbers of palace degree-holders came from the more pacified northern provinces (95 percent of the palace graduates in 1646, for instance, came from Shandong, Henan, or Shanxi prov-

ince, or the Northern Capital Region centered on Beijing). After that, the South in general resumed its dominant influence in the examination market despite the Qing reimposition of the regional quota in effect for palace degrees since 1427.⁴⁸ The quota system evolved in the eighteenth century to accommodate degree-holders in lesser provinces, particularly frontier areas in the Southwest and Northwest. Although the rankings of provinces in producing palace degree-holders did not change dramatically, the percentages coming from the leading provinces during the Ming and early Qing declined by about 2–3 percent in the late Qing. In contrast, frontier provinces in the late Qing dramatically increased their quotas, with Gansu in the Northwest increasing threefold and Guizhou in the Southwest almost quadrupling its number of palace degree-holders.⁴⁹

The long-term centrality of the Yangzi delta in the late imperial examination market remained in place, but it was challenged by the success of Fujian province in producing top candidates during the early Ming dynasty. In the late Qing, Fujian's fortunes revived, when the palace degree-holders increased 18 percent. Two prefectures in the province became the two leading producers of palace degrees in the period from 1776 to 1904. None had ranked among the top ten prefectures during the early and mid-Qing.⁵⁰ Population increase also affected all provinces during the Qing dynasty. For Jiangnan, the number of palace degree-holders per mean population declined 63 percent, in Zhejiang the decline was 58 percent, and Fujian had a remarkable 73 percent drop. Only frontier provinces in the Southeast and Liaoning in the Northeast, where educational opportunities were expanding, showed statistical increases.⁵¹

Such geographical trends translated into power and influence in dynastic politics. The higher percentage of southerners in official life became a perennial problem in Ming politics, and the Qing changes in the quota system only offset the educational advantages of the South over other regions in the empire but had not eliminated them. The Ming and Qing government judiciously kept track of the numbers of graduates by province to keep the examination market reasonably fair and open empire-wide.⁵² Nevertheless, at the pinnacle of power, only palace graduates, particularly those who finished at the top of their class and entered the

Hanlin Academy, transmitted their local and regional interests to the imperial bureaucracy.

Time to Degree

Finally, lack of overt social discrimination against the elderly distinguished the civil examinations. In a society in which filial piety and respect for elders was a foundation of public and private morality, it made eminent sense to rulers, examiners, and candidates that all ages should be eligible to take civil examinations as many times as they could afford to and as long as their social and linguistic credentials remained intact. In fact, the examinations could alter perceptions of one's social status in remarkable ways. Elderly licentiates, for example, would grovel before youthful provincial degree-holders because of their differentiated political status, which augmented the social status of a successful young man and diminished that of the failed elderly. Old failures contrasted with youthful prodigies within a public that honored the elderly but left room for unofficial stress on youth and mental vitality.

In his eighteenth-century satirical novel *The Scholars* (*Rulin waishi*), the examination failure Wu Jingzi (1701–1754) exploited this theme in his depiction of a 1487 meeting between a younger licentiate who had passed the prefectural examination and an older village teacher in the temple school who was over sixty and had not yet qualified for the provincial degree:

Ming dynasty scholars called all those who passed the prefectural examination “classmates,” and those who only qualified for this examination “juniors.” A young man in his teens who passed was considered senior to an unsuccessful candidate, even if the latter were eighty years old. It was like the case of a concubine. A woman is called “new wife” when she marries, and later “mistress”; but a concubine remains “new wife” even when her hair is white.⁵³

Records profiling Ming civil examination success in Fujian province also recorded the wide range in the ages of candidates who passed the

civil examinations, as if success on the relentless examinations were a mark of both precociousness and endurance. Over forty degree-holders in Ming Fujian were between thirteen and nineteen *sui*, which is not surprising given how early young men began to memorize the Four Books and one of the Five Classics. More than eighty Fujian graduates were over eighty *sui* (= “years”; see the “Conventions” chapter), however, with some over 100 when they entered the examination compounds. One was appointed prefect at the age of 104.⁵⁴

Given the memorization requirements, less before 1756 and considerably more after 1793, boys who achieved provincial graduate status before they were twenty were heralded as prodigies. One was old if at forty *sui* he was still taking qualifying examinations. Old men were known to explain classical passages to younger candidates in the examination compound in exchange for essays written by the younger man in the latest styles.⁵⁵ Authorities noted that in licensing examinations, the registration forms often indicated that the candidate was a youth and yet the person taking the examination was sometimes forty or fifty *sui*. Examiners scolded education officials for not checking the person actually entering to take the examination.⁵⁶

The few who passed the prohibitively competitive Ming and Qing dynasty provincial examinations—usually less than 5 percent—were typically in their mid- to late twenties. During the sixteenth century, most provincial graduates (63 percent) in Nanjing were between twenty-one and thirty, and only 26 percent were between thirty-one and forty. The youngest graduate was fifteen *sui*, while the oldest was fifty. When we compare such Ming provincial results in Nanking with those in the Qing period, we find that the age at which candidates typically became provincial graduates in the nineteenth century increased. During the Ming, only 7–8 percent had been over forty, with none over fifty *sui*, while in the Qing 15–17 percent were over forty *sui*. Over 3 percent of all palace degree-holders in 1835 and 1851 were over fifty. This age shift was due to the sudden increase of material to master after 1793, which took candidates more time.

The 1894 *optimus*, Zhang Jian, who qualified at the youthful age of eighteen *sui* in 1871 for the Jiangnan provincial examination, failed at this level five times before he finally passed in 1885, ranking second at

the age of thirty-three. This age of passing was typical for 20 percent of the provincial candidates. During the intervening years between 1871 and 1885, Zhang had been required to take and pass several renewal and requalifying examinations to remain eligible. After his belated success in the provincial examination, it took Zhang five tries (1886, 1889, 1890, 1892, and 1894) before he successfully passed the metropolitan examination at the age of forty-two. He ranked only sixtieth on the metropolitan examination, but Zhang placed tenth on a reexamination and finished first on the 1894 palace examination. He entered the Hanlin Academy as a compiler. His fame as an *optimus* rested on almost twenty years of examination failure, during which he persevered to succeed.⁵⁷

When old men in their eighties increasingly qualified for provincial examinations in the late Qing, they were typically rewarded with secondary list (*fubang*) honors even when they failed. The Qianlong emperor rewarded all old men who took the metropolitan examination in 1736. In the 1852 provincial examinations, there were thirteen men over ninety *sui*, for example, and they were each awarded the provincial degree. In addition, the sixty-five candidates over eighty *sui* were granted *fubang* status. There were seventeen candidates over ninety *sui* in 1853, with seventy-nine over eighty.⁵⁸

Comparing the ages of the *optimus* for both the Ming and Qing dynasties, we find that in the Ming about 13 percent of all *optimi* for whom we have information were under twenty-five *sui*. In the Qing this percentage decreased significantly to 6 percent. Over half of the fifty-five Ming *optimi* were between 26 and 35; in the Qing this remained roughly the same. For the Ming, 83 percent of the *optimi* were between 26 and 45, for the Qing 86 percent. Older *optimi* (over 46 *sui*) increased from only 4 percent in the Ming to about 8 percent in the Qing. In general, fewer youths and more older men were chosen as *optimi* from the Ming to the Qing, with the average age moving from thirty-three to thirty-six. Consequently, Zhang Jian was a fairly typical, although somewhat older, *optimus* in 1894. Most, like him, had failed provincial and metropolitan examinations several times over ten to twenty years of their adult lives before they arrived at the pinnacle. The emotional costs of such delayed success will be assessed in the next chapter.

Very few Ming palace graduates were under twenty, and most were between twenty-six and forty-five *sui*. During the Qing, 72 percent of all

palace graduates were between twenty-six and forty-five. In 1868, 15 percent were twenty-five or under; in 1894, the rate was 11 percent. Only 6 percent of *optimi* during the Qing were under twenty-five. As the number of candidates for the provincial degree increased in the Qing, their average age also increased. But the percentage of those over fifty *sui* declined from 5 percent in 1835 to less than 1 percent in 1894. Younger candidates were more in tune with the stylistic changes associated with late Qing examination essays. Reintroduction of poetry questions in the late eighteenth century also made a difference. Thus, older candidates failed at a higher rate than in the past.

Examiners reported the unusual increase in older candidates with great concern, because they realized that old men were failing the examinations over and over again at a time when population increase had prohibitively outpaced examination places. In the 1699 Shuntian provincial examination, for example, a Guangdong literatus of over 100 *sui* was led into the Beijing examination compound at night with full pomp and circumstance by his great-grandson, who held a lantern and a placard announcing him as “a hundred year-old in the examination compound” to commemorate the event.⁵⁹ At the other extreme, the Qianlong emperor commanded examiners in 1770 to pass two youths, one eleven and the other thirteen *sui*, at the Shuntian provincial examination to encourage young prodigies.⁶⁰ In 1784, the increase in elderly candidates for the *jìnshì* became alarming. A memorial noted that among the metropolitan candidates that year, one was over ninety, twenty were over eighty, and five were over seventy *sui*. The emperor ordered officials to give them special awards, even though they did not pass the examination.⁶¹ In 1826, a 104-year-old candidate, again from Guangdong, failed the metropolitan examination but was symbolically assigned to the Imperial School.⁶²

Such alarming trends were confirmed by contemporary Western observers: “In what land but China would it be possible to find examples of a grandfather, son, and grandson all competing in the same examination for the same degree, age and indomitable perseverance being rewarded at the age of eighty years by the long-coveted honour?”⁶³

By its duration and elaboration from the Ming to Qing, the late imperial civil examinations became a dynamic force in reproducing the character

of Chinese state and society on terms that each dynasty and its cooperating literati reset for themselves. Classical learning, literati prestige, dynastic power, and cultural practice were accommodated to this testing system to such a degree that the examination system in the Ming-Qing era functioned, fairly or not, as a measurable arbiter of elite culture, politics, and society. Civil examinations could not dictate to the society at large, nor could literati elites simply dictate the curriculum to the government (see Chapter 1). In educational terms, however, the examination system communicated educational authority via state and society from one generation to the next.⁶⁴

The literati and merchant groups, who competed in the Ming-Qing civil examination market described in this chapter, were constantly under demographic pressure. By 1850, the institutions designed in the early Ming had not changed enough to keep pace with the demographics of the society at large. As the population more than doubled in Qing times to 450 million in 1850, the numbers of palace and provincial degree-holders remained relatively stagnant. Competition for degrees at all levels, from the county to the capital, became prohibitive. The resulting higher and higher memorization standards were a response to increased competition in the examination market.⁶⁵

We turn now to the popular, literary, and classical forms of knowledge that informed the examination curriculum and late imperial literati culture. We will address many cultural dimensions that existed outside the precincts of the civil examinations themselves. The cultural and religious forms and the popular images were not mere epiphenomena, hollow rhetoric, or superstitious belief that grew out of an autocratic political regime wedded to a savvy literati elite. Had they been empty cultural forms, the examination process would not have lasted until 1905, nor would it have voluntarily drawn into its “cultural prisons” the “best and brightest” of the empire.

Anxiety, Dreams, and the Examination Life

YOUNG AND OLD brought different experiences into the examination compound. The rituals of success lured the immature. Repeated failures tortured older men still seeking an elusive degree. Their emotional tensions, based on years of hopeful preparation for boys, and even more years of bitter defeat for men, represented the human response to the dynasty's examination compounds. Its venues were places of opportunity for the youths trying to break in and "cultural prisons" for the old men who never made it out.¹ Mental pressure to succeed molded individual character. For most, persistence, symbolized by the career of *optimus* Zhang Jian (see Chapter 4), was a way of life. Others channeled what tormented them into elite and popular expression and, occasionally, political resistance.

Civil examinations mediated the classical discourse of "Way learning" and literati everyday lives. Tensions, which brought a few fame and fortune but left most dealing with disappointment, were catalysts.² Literati often turned to religion and the mantic arts to channel their emotional responses to the competitive examinations. Shang Yanliu, the last Qing *tertius* in the 1904 palace examination, wrote about his cousin's examination experiences:

In 1891 at the age of twenty, my [brilliant] cousin passed the provincial examination and became a provincial graduate. However, upon

his return the following year to Guangzhou [Canton], from the metropolitan examination in Peking, he fell ill and died soon after. My mother said to me, “Too much intelligence shortens one’s life—better be a bit stupid like you.”³

Sigmund Freud’s account of treating a student preparing for his doctoral examinations for “mental exhaustion” is similarly informative. It leads Freud to a discussion of dreams and occultism:

One day I was visited by a highly intelligent young man, a student preparing for his final examinations for a doctorate, but unable to take them since, as he complained, he had lost all interest and power of concentration and even any faculty for orderly memory. . . . The influence of psychoanalysis restored his ability to work, and he left me in order to go in for his examinations; but after he had passed them successfully he came back to me for a short time in the autumn of that year.⁴

Those who failed civil examinations often mocked the selection process in popular novels, such as Wu Jingzi’s (1701–1754) *The Scholars* and vernacular stories by Pu Songling (1640–1715). Such narratives framed the examination process from the angle of the failures. Because such works appealed to both elites and nonelites, we should problematize the “popular-elite” dichotomy by showing the fluid interaction between both.⁵ Recorded dreams and auspicious events were manifest, nonofficial accounts of the collective mental tensions of the examination candidates, which the public used to explain their individual success or failure.⁶

Boys and men, given the gender ideology of their patriarchal society, directly experienced the anxiety engendered by examinations. Fathers and mothers, sisters and extended relatives, were not immune. They shared in the experience and offered comfort, solace, and encouragement, but the direct experience of success or failure belonged to the millions of male examination candidates who competed against increasingly difficult odds. A deep social and political chasm separated the official classical standards of the examiners from the religious strategies candidates were willing to appropriate therapeutically to ease their fears.

Literati frustration was the common theme since medieval examinations.⁷ The levels of memorization, wide reading in classical works, and years of training required to write classical essays (and regulated verse after 1756) entailed a childhood and young adulthood that sons of elites shared over time, across generations, and empire-wide across linguistic and geographic barriers. Those who short-circuited the educational regime by cleverly mastering model examination essays and leaving the task of memorization to others were nonetheless classically literate, if they hoped to get beyond the local licensing and qualifying examinations.

Classical illiteracy could be disguised in local tests, but the illiterate were weeded out in provincial examinations, where corruption inside the examination compound or examiner bribery were more telling alternate routes for classical literates to gain provincial and metropolitan degrees. In Ming times, the triennial provincial examination market grew from 50,000 to 75,000 candidates and from 100,000 to 150,000 in the Qing. The challenge no longer was to demonstrate classical literacy, which was the cultural divider for boys in local examinations, but to write elegant 8-legged essays that would stand out in a sea of young and old men who had honed their writing skills for decades. If someone classically illiterate bought a lower degree, he was exposed quickly enough if he had bribed his way into office. The Qing court always watched for such consequences.⁸

Examination success usually meant career success, but what success meant in terms of careers changed dramatically from Ming to Qing. All but palace degree-holders were down classed by the late Ming, and in the Qing even palace degree-holders frequently had to wait years to gain an appointment as a magistrate or prefect if they passed in the bottom tier. We have seen that social prestige, legal privileges, and corvée labor exemptions kept most commoner families competing in the examination market. The diminishing opportunities for examination success by the nineteenth century exacerbated human frailties. No dynasty ever faced a demographic expansion of elites commensurate with the Qing, from 250 million in 1650 to 350 million by 1800.⁹

Growing up a male member of an elite family during Ming and Qing presupposed long-standing patterns of socialization. Adults defined childhood for millions of young men in terms of daily preparation.

Literati anxiety and frustrations went hand in hand. “Male anxiety” was an elite social, medical, and intellectual phenomenon generated by the historical experiences of men as individuals and within family life. There was no single response to this emotional pressure. There were, however, discernible patterns in how Chinese elites dealt with the diverse mental tensions that the relentless machinery of examination life engendered.¹⁰

Memorization and the Sociology of Classicism before 1850

Civil examinations were a social spectacle in counties, provincial capitals, and Beijing, which complemented the political spectacle inside examination compounds. Frequently the rites of passage from childhood to young adult in wealthy families were measured by the number of classical texts that a child mastered at a particular age. “Capping” of a young boy between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one, for example, implied that he had mastered all of the Four Books and one of the Five Classics, the minimum requirement before 1787 to compete in local civil service examinations.¹¹

Although “Way learning” scholars had criticized rote learning in favor of moral self-cultivation and intellectual awakening since the Song dynasty, one of the ironies of the Ming-Qing examination regime was that it required careful memorization of Cheng-Zhu annotations of the Classics to succeed in the degree market. Rote learning cut against the grain of moral cultivation, because the examinations had no means to measure morality directly or determine whether the memorization of “Way learning” brought with it increased intellectual awakening. Good writing was the assumed mark of a cultivated literatus, but there were enough counterexamples to challenge that notion.

Memorization as a Mental Technology

A common Ming saying was “To bequeath a case full of gold does not compare to teaching a son one Classic.”¹² The traditions of composition in imperial China were rehearsed orally in a student’s ability to recall verbatim a classical text. The oral and the written went together, enhancing both literacy and memory (see Figure 5.1).¹³



Figure 5.1. The 1430 *optimus* writes from memory. *Ming zhuangyuan tukao* [Illustrated survey of optimi during the Ming dynasty]. Compiled by Gu Dingchen and Gu Zuxun. 1607 edition.

Classical literacy was formed through a three-stage learning process: (1) memorization of Chinese graphs; (2) reading the Four Books, one of the Five Classics (until 1786 when all the Classics had to be memorized), and Dynastic Histories; and (3) composition.

For educated men (and women), the ability to write elegant examination essays was the crowning achievement. This learning process began with rote memorization during childhood, continued with youthful reading, and concluded with mature writing. As a graded sequence of learning, the foundation was long hours of oral memorization spent by children ages three to eight *sui*. Premodern literati believed that the memory (*jixing*) was strongest at an early age, whereas understanding was a gradual achievement that derived from mastering the literary language and its moral and historical content. Chinese thought that students were educable at age five or six, but mature learning could commence only when they reached fifteen *sui*.¹⁴

But first children mastered written forms by tracing Chinese characters from memory (see Figure 5.2). Usually before they entered clan or temple schools at age eight, students had already memorized the *Thousand Character Text* (*Qianzi wen*) and *Hundred Surnames* (*Baijia xing*) primers, which dated from the Song. In addition, they mastered the *Three Character Classic* (*Sanzi jing*), which was a “Way learning” tract attributed to Wang Yinglin (1223–1296) in the early Yuan.¹⁵ Altogether these three famous primers contained about 1,500 different written characters within their total of 2,636 graphs. Preschool sessions at home, often under the guidance of mothers,¹⁶ enabled students to memorize the important sequences and combinations of written graphs that were peculiar to the classical written language.¹⁷ The memorization of primers was reinforced by calligraphy practice.¹⁸ The Reverend Justus Doolittle described the situation he found in 1865:

Pupils do not study, in school, books on mathematics, geography, and the natural sciences, but the writings of Confucius and Mencius. These they are required to commit to memory, and recite with their backs toward the book. This is called “*backing the book*.” They are not taught in classes, but each studies the book he pleases, taking a longer or shorter lesson according to his ability. They all study out



Figure 5.2. The 1463 *optimus* learning characters as a child. *Ming zhuangyuan tukao* [Illustrated survey of *optimi* during the Ming dynasty]. Compiled by Gu Dingchen and Gu Zuxun. 1607 edition.

loud, oftentimes screaming at the top of their voices. They first learn the sounds of the characters, so as to recite them *memoriter*. After years of study they acquire an insight into their meaning and use. They commence to write when they begin going to school, tracing the characters given them as patterns on paper by means of hair pencil and China ink. It requires an immense amount of practice to write the language correctly and rapidly.¹⁹

Educators as diverse as Cheng Duanli (1271–1345) in the Yuan and the 1821 provincial graduate Wang Yun (1784–1854) in the Qing emphasized tracing the characters in primers as the best way to improve calligraphy. Cheng thought that students should over time increase their tracing from 1,500 to 4,000 characters a day.²⁰ Wang noted that knowledge of characters was the primary constituent of classical literacy. Reading and writing began only after children memorized about 2,000 different graphs.²¹

Next began the memorization of the Four Books and, during the Ming dynasty, one of the Five Classics (all five were required after 1786). If minimal classical literacy (i.e., “primer literacy”) required mastery of 2,000 different characters, students generally increased that total steadily to the 10,000 characters common in the Classics, which were required for full classical literacy.²² Poetry, which was important for classical literacy in Tang-Song examinations, was restored as part of the civil examinations after 1756. The paleographical dictionary *Analysis of Characters as an Explanation of Writing* (*Shuowen jiezi*), compiled by Xu Shen (58–147) during the Later Han dynasty, contained 9,373 different characters arranged according to 530 radicals (*bushou*), a framework that despite modification remained the basic organization in most premodern and modern classical dictionaries.²³

Because of requirements to compose poetry, rhyme-prose, and belles lettres, several scholars produced rhyming and pronunciation dictionaries as examination aids during the Tang and Song dynasties.²⁴ During the Qing dynasty, the *Kangxi Dictionary*, completed in 1716, grouped 47,030 different characters under 214 radicals. Altogether there were about 48,000 characters in late imperial times, but many of them were variants.²⁵

Literati educators scheduled the memorization process based on the number of graphs. Wang Chang (1725–1806), a private academy teacher in the heyday of Ancient Learning, when all of the Five Classics were required, told incoming students at his academy in Nanchang, Jiangxi, in 1789 that the total number of repeating graphs (or repeating “words”) in each Classic were 40,848 in the *Poetry Classic*; 27,134 in the *Documents*; 24,437 in the *Change*; 98,994 in the *Record of Rites* (which included the *Great Learning* and the *Doctrine of the Mean*); and 15,984 in the *Springs and Autumns* annals. Wang enthusiastically predicted that it would take students only 690 days, if they were diligent, to recite the more than 200,000 words in these five texts.²⁶

Using the “Thirteen Classics” of the Tang and Song dynasties as his baseline, Miyazaki Ichisada approximates the character count for words by including the Four Books, Five Classics, and commentaries to the *Springs and Autumns*, which suggests that candidates for Tang-Song civil examinations had to memorize about 570,000 repeating graphs. Note that in Table 5.1 the word counts that were part of the examination requirements.²⁷

Table 5.1. Character Count for Words in the “Thirteen Classics.”

Books	Characters	Requirement
<i>Analects</i>	11,705	Required in Ming-Qing
<i>Mencius</i>	34,685	Required in Ming-Qing
<i>Filial Piety</i>	1,903	Required until 1787
<i>Change</i>	24,107	Optional in Ming-Qing
<i>Documents</i>	25,700	Optional in Ming-Qing
<i>Poetry</i>	39,234	Optional in Ming-Qing
<i>Zuo Commentary</i>	196,845	Optional in Ming-Qing
<i>Gongyang zhuan</i>	44,075	Optional in Ming-Qing
<i>Guliang zhuan</i>	41,512	Optional in Ming-Qing
<i>Rites of Zhou</i>	45,806	Not required
<i>Decorum Ritual</i>	56,624	Not required
<i>Record of Rites</i> (includes <i>Great Learning</i> and <i>Doctrine of the Mean</i> , which were required)	99,010	Optional in Ming-Qing
Total	621,206 (Optional = 470,000)	518,000 required after 1786; Four Books: about 75,000; Five Classics: about 470,000

On the basis of this formidable, although somewhat anachronistic, list, Miyazaki estimates that at the rate of 200 characters a day, it would take six years to memorize about 400,000 characters, even when most characters repeated, a less confident view than Wang Chang's estimate of 690 days for 200,000 words.²⁸ Wang's optimistic account is confirmed by Shang Yanliu, the last Qing *tertius* on the 1904 civil palace examination:

Before I reached the age of twelve, my course of studies to prepare for the examinations consisted of the above mentioned [classical] program. When one comes to think of it, wouldn't it seem too much to ask of a five to twelve-year old boy to not only study so many texts, including the Four Books and Five Classics, but to memorize them and to expect him to understand and explain them as well? In actuality, as long as one studied everyday without interruption, this could be achieved—there was nothing strange or miraculous about it.²⁹

Legends of youths who had committed prodigious amounts of information to memory were often recounted. Ni Heng from Shandong province during the Later Han dynasty was remembered for his ability on his travels to memorize at a single glance all the characters of the Seven Classics officially inscribed on hundreds of stone stele. Ni failed to recite only two graphs, which were missing from the stele themselves.³⁰ Later in the Ming, Sang Yue, who took his provincial degree in 1465 and became a local education official, when asked why he would throw away or burn his books, replied that he had always been able memorize any book that caught his eye. "It's already inside me," he exclaimed.³¹

For those without photographic memories, instruction in mnemonic skills was part of the repertoire in imperial China, where oral recitation was aided by rhyming characters, four-character jingles, and the technique of writing matching and balanced antithetical pairs of characters. Wang Yun and most educators made the memorization of two-character phrases a major building block of a classical memory. After the poetry question was added in 1756, which required candidates to compose Tang dynasty regulated verse, the requirements of balance, symmetry, and antithetical lines became more pronounced.³²

To facilitate composing classically literate essays, the Kangxi emperor ordered the *Thesaurus Arranged by Rhymes* (*Peiwen yunfu*) to be compiled for candidates in 1704, which was completed in 1711 and reprinted in 1720. It classified phrases and allusions according to the rhymes of over 10,000 different characters used as the last character in a passage. Under each entry, the editors illustrated its literary uses. The *Thesaurus* conveniently organized pairs of parallel phrases for examination candidates for easy memorization.³³

Writing in 1923, the chancellor of Beijing University Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940), who passed the special 1890 civil metropolitan examination and entered the Hanlin Academy in 1892,³⁴ described such learning techniques in modernist terms in his memoirs:

Balanced, antithetical clauses are a technique for constructing phrases that started with one character and extended to four characters. Writing five character phrases or more would have been writing poetry, [not essays]. This allowed for free construction without having to present model phrases first. Using antithesis, not only nouns, verbs, and adjectives were paired, but among nouns, animals, plants, minerals, utensils, and homes, and among adjectives, colors, qualities, and numbers could also be matched. . . . Other cases were obtained through analogy. In addition, when we composed antithetical clauses, we also discriminated among the four tones. Characters in even tone, for example, were paired with others of even tone.³⁵

When Chinese learned that the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) had a prodigious memory, which was based on the medieval European art of remembering, they invited him to present his mnemonic devices. The governor of Jiangxi province asked Ricci to teach his techniques to the governor's three sons then preparing for the civil examinations. Ricci used his memory skills to augment literati interest in Christianity. Given the usefulness of such memory techniques and printed primers to convey vocabulary and doctrine, the Jesuits constructed their own classical primer, which was entitled *The Catholic*

Four-Character Classic (*Tianzhu shengjiao sizi jing*), as a means to create a popular classical catechism to spread the foreign faith.³⁶

Scope of the Classical Curriculum

Cheng Duanli, who worked in local government schools during the Yuan dynasty, prepared a reading schedule for his clan school, which was influential as a model classical curriculum during the Ming and Qing. It is worth detailing the reading regime that Cheng formulated for youths to master the “Way learning” orthodoxy and prepare for civil examinations:³⁷

Preschool Classical Readings (before the age of eight *sui*)

- Glosses for characters on nature and principles (*Xingli zixun*)
Optional alternative: *Thousand Character Text* or other primers such as the *Search for Knowledge by Children* (*Mengqiu*).
- *What all local youthful candidates should know* (*Tongzi xuzhi*)
A primer by Zhu Xi.

Classical Readings in School (after the age of eight until fourteen or fifteen)

- *Elementary Learning* (*Xiaoxue*): An anthology of classical selections compiled by Zhu Xi.³⁸
- Four Books in order (required at all levels of civil examinations):
 - *Great Learning*: text and commentaries
 - *Analects*: text only
 - *Mencius*: text only
 - *Doctrine of the Mean*: text only
- Seven Classics in order (one required at all levels of civil examinations):³⁹
 - *Filial Piety* (required for Ming-Qing “discourse” questions)
 - *Change*: complement with Song “Way learning” commentaries
 - *Documents*: text only
 - *Poetry*: text only
 - *Decorum Ritual* and *Record of Rites*: text only
 - *Rituals of Zhou*: text only
 - *Springs and Autumns*: text and three Han commentaries

Advanced Classical Training (after the age of fifteen)

- *Parsing of Phrases in the Great Learning (Daxue zhangju)*, by Zhu Xi
- *Collected Notes to the Analects (Lunyu jizhu)*, by Zhu Xi
- *Collected Notes to the Mencius (Mengzi jizhu)*, by Zhu Xi
- *Parsing of Phrases in the Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong zhangju)*, by Zhu Xi
- *Questions on the Analects (Lunyu huowen)*, by Zhu Xi: compare with *Lunyu jizhu*
- *Questions on the Mencius (Mengzi huowen)*, by Zhu Xi: compare with *Mengzi jizhu*
- Review original text of Classics by copying out portions from memory.
- Take three to four years to master the six rules of character formation.⁴⁰

Except for its focus on the “Thirteen Classics,” Cheng’s curriculum was emulated in the Ming and Qing civil examination curriculum, which emphasized mastery of the Four Books and one of the Five Classics. From 1645 until 1757, the Qing curriculum for provincial and metropolitan examinations was exactly as it had been during the Ming dynasty from 1384 to 1643. Table 5.2 shows the early Qing format for the civil examinations. If a student could cope with intense rote training, he could try his hand at passing the licensing examinations as early as age fifteen, although most young men rarely achieved licentiate status before age twenty-one.

In perhaps the best documented case of a late imperial “examination life,” Zhang Jian (b. 1853), the 1894 palace examination *optimus* at the age of forty-one *sui*, began at the age of four (three years old in Western chronology) to learn the *Thousand Character Text* from his father. At sixteen he was ready to take the county licensing examination in 1868, requiring classical essays and regulated verse, which he passed (see Figure 5.3).⁴¹

If we compare Cheng Duanli’s early fourteenth-century list with the classical curriculum that Zhang Jian followed in the late nineteenth century, we find many parallels, despite differences, which demonstrate the

Table 5.2. Early Qing Format of Provincial and Metropolitan Civil Service Examinations, 1646–1756.

Session No.	No. of Questions
One	
1. <i>Four Books</i>	3 quotations
2. <i>Change</i>	4 quotations (optional)
3. <i>Documents</i>	4 quotations (optional)
4. <i>Poetry</i>	4 quotations (optional)
5. <i>Annals</i>	4 quotations (optional)
6. <i>Rites</i>	4 quotations (optional)
Two	
1. Discourse	1 quotation
2. Documentary style	3 documents
3. Judicial terms	5 terms
Three	
1. Policy questions	5 essays

Note: On session one, all candidates were expected to specialize on one of the Five Classics.

educational continuity of the classical curriculum for elites from 1315 to 1756, when the curriculum was significantly revamped. The major difference was the return of poetry, particularly Tang regulated verse, to the civil examinations in the middle of the eighteenth century. The content of Zhang's education is listed below by the age in *sui* at which he studied a particular text:⁴²

Age 4–5: *Thousand Character Text*

5–11: *Three Character Classic*

Hundred Surnames

Works on poetry (required on civil examinations since 1756)

Filial Piety Classic

Great Learning

Doctrine of the Mean

Analects

Mencius

Poetry Classic

Classical writing primers⁴³

12: Recite Four Books from memory

- 13: Review Four Books and Five Classics
Erya (Progress toward correctness) dictionary
Poetry exercises⁴⁴
- 14: *Record of Rites*
Springs and Autumns
Zuo Commentary
Composition exercises⁴⁵
- 15: *Rituals of Zhou*
Decorum Ritual
- 17: Historical collections, such as *Zizhi tongjian gangmu*
(Condensation of the Comprehensive Mirror of History),
attributed to Zhu Xi

Zhang's readings represented an ordered chronology, starting with elementary texts before mastering the more difficult Four Books and Five Classics (all were required in Zhang's time). Composition, defined as the ability to write well using classical Chinese forms about the Four Books and Five Classics and the ability to compose poetry in regulated verse, represented the culmination of the transition from childhood to young student.⁴⁶ Historical readings were needed to handle policy questions in provincial, metropolitan, and palace examinations.

By his sixteenth birthday, Zhang Jian passed the local examination in his home county in Jiangsu province, although he ranked below number 200 on the final roll. The same year, Zhang passed the prefectural licensing examination to become a licentiate, and two years later he finished in the first tier on the qualifying examination. At the age of eighteen, Zhang proceeded to the next level of examinations at the provincial capital, where he would have a much harder time.⁴⁷

Essay Writing and Formation of a Writing Elite

The key cultural difference between an education requiring full classical literacy and one needed to read more popular vernacular works was that in the former the ability to write took precedence. The regimen for reading described above for civil examination candidates was not intended to create a "reading public," although a "reading elite" was a by-product of the training. They were in training, via memorization and calligraphy

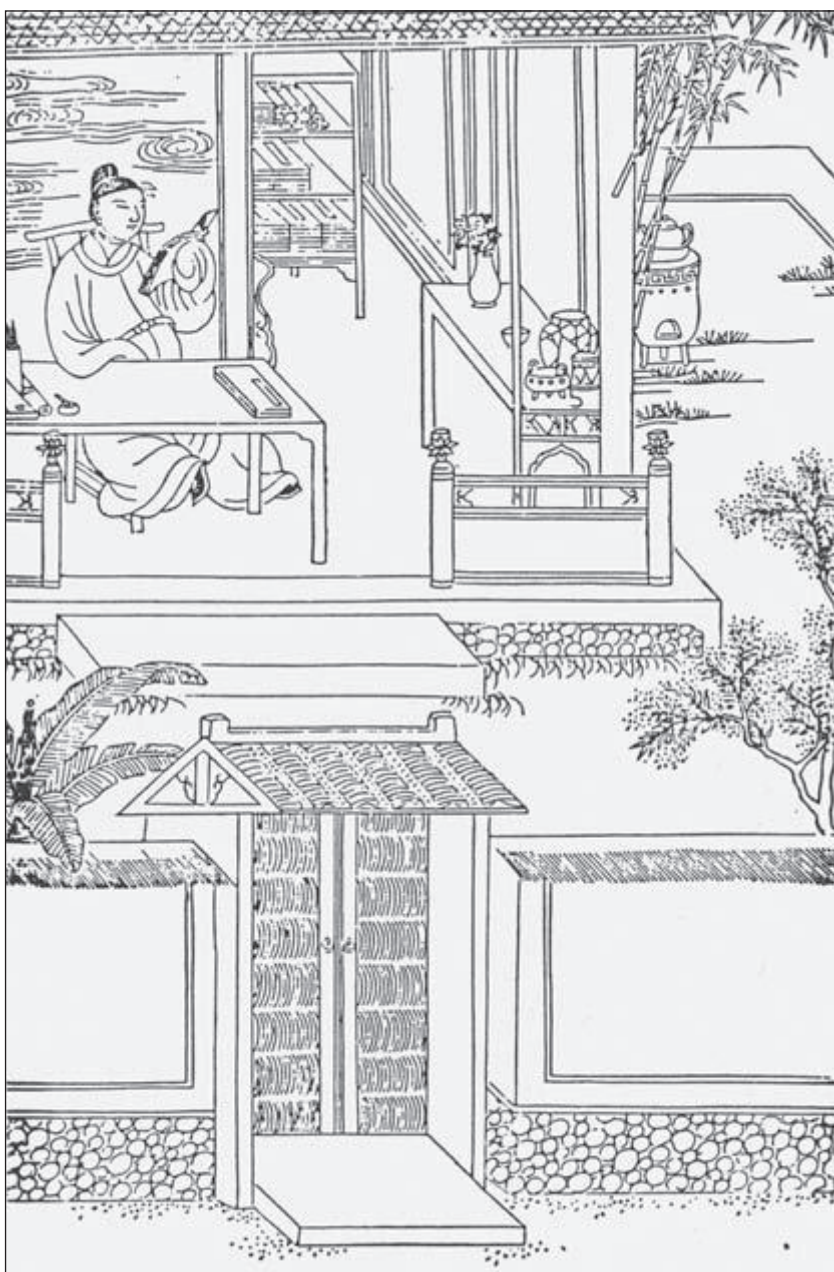


Figure 5.3. The 1391 *optimus* reading at home. *Ming zhuangyuan tukao* [Illustrated survey of *optimi* during the Ming dynasty]. Compiled by Gu Dingchen and Gu Zuxun. 1607 edition.

practice, to become members of a “writing elite,” men whose essays would mark each as a classically trained literatus who could write his way to fame, fortune, and power via examination essays.⁴⁸

Reading alone was insufficient in such a cultural context. Composition was the final stage of a classical education. To write classical Chinese well was to perform a literary art appreciated by an elite audience that could not only read the product but could also understand and reproduce the prosodic rules that underlay the score. The limitation, control, and selection of the “writing elite,” not the enlargement of the “reading public,” were the dynasty’s primary goals in using civil examinations to select officials.⁴⁹

To write with technical proficiency and aesthetic sensibility was the *sine qua non* of the literatus as a man of culture. From the point of view of the court and the bureaucracy, classical composition ensured common linguistic traits and classical memories in officialdom. From the angle of the literatus, however, to write was to engage in a form of culture (*wen*) that allowed the literatus to reach back to the ancients and enunciate the truths of his predecessors. Both the needs of Ming and Qing imperial orthodoxy and the acute cultural sensibilities of educated men were met and compromised in the examination regime. It was not a one-way imperial hegemony based simply on political or social power (see Chapter 1).

The task was to train youths to think and write using classical forms once they had attained classical literacy. To write about the Four Books and Five Classics required a literatus “to speak in the place of the sages” (*dai shengren liyan*). A child could memorize characters, chant poetry lines, and master balanced, antithetical phrases, but a full classical education required a level of understanding and thinking that only a young adult could bring to fruition in an essay.⁵⁰ For example, Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801), who spent much of his career teaching classical writing at private academies while waiting for a political appointment, described the transition from child to adulthood in terms of writing:

Today, when I have a boy compose an essay, even if it is just a string of several words, he should complete the sentence. . . . It should proceed from small to large, from brief to long, to enable him to grasp that even a three- or five-word phrase is not too little and that

several hundreds and thousands of words are not too many. It's just like an infant whose organs and bones are already complete, and he grows into a man.⁵¹

As youths grew in writing skills they could write longer and more complicated essays. Zhang Xuecheng thought that the whole essay mattered more than its parts. Focus on the latter represented a piecemeal approach, which Zhang thought a child could successfully mimic but not necessarily understand. As the boy reached maturity, most others stressed the parts to prepare the whole essay. They trained children to write parts of the 8-legged essay separately before they could link them together into a coherent essay. Both sides were agreed, however, that young children were incapable of writing meaningful essays. Numerous writing primers were devised to try to facilitate the transition from reading to writing.⁵²

Wang Yun thought a student was ready to write essays at sixteen *sui*. Like Zhang Xuecheng, he used a metaphor of physical growth and maturation to describe how a child progressed from early memorization to the adult ability to compose essays. Prosodic rules could be learned mechanically, but the aesthetic sensibility needed to appreciate style and moral content took time. Because of the civil examinations, even those like Zhang who expressed doubts about the usefulness of the 8-legged essay chose it to teach writing.⁵³ The transition from memorized childhood phrases to serious essays was also mediated by the use of grammatical particles, which enabled the prose writer to navigate from the balanced pieces of literary form to a thematically tightly conceived classical essay.⁵⁴

Many teachers of writing saw the 8-legged essay as a necessary evil, but they challenged the usual methods for teaching this mechanical form by first showing students how to emulate ancient-style prose essays of the great Tang and Song masters, which underwent revivals in both the late Ming and Qing.⁵⁵ Many in the Qing thought these ancient-style prose pieces were the origins of the 8-legged essay form during the Song, before the examination essay took a more mechanical, rule-like direction in the Ming. Zhang Xuecheng thought the 8-legged essay too difficult for beginning students and started with smaller sections.⁵⁶

Throughout the late empire, however, prose composition remained trapped between the ideals of classical educators such as Zhang Xuecheng and the centrality of the classical essay (and regulated poetry in Zhang's time) for personal, family, and lineage success.⁵⁷ Few students could separate the classical essay as a literary form from its careerist political and social context. The many that railed against it, as we will see, eventually took matters into their own hands and made a virtue out of necessity by presenting the mid-Ming inspired "8-legged essay" as a proud emblem of classical literacy and ancient-style prose.

Classical Specialization during the Ming and Qing

Candidates for Ming and Qing civil examinations specialized on one of the Five Classics. Classical specialization went back to the Han dynasty, when the court assigned specialists to the Imperial Academy.⁵⁸ During the Tang and Song, specialization on the Classics continued, along with specialty examinations in law, calligraphy, and mathematics. The Yuan reinitiated specialization on one of the Five Classics in 1314. Until 1787, when all of the Five Classics were required, local and provincial degree-holders wrote essays on session one of the provincial and metropolitan examinations for the Four Books and the Classic of their choice.⁵⁹

Registration records noted which of the Five Classics a candidate selected, and clerks in the provincial and metropolitan examination compounds assigned papers to the appropriate wardroom for that Classic. Wang Yangming, for example, registered as one of the 2,200 candidates for the 1492 Zhejiang provincial examination at the age of only twenty *sui*. Wang passed on his first try as one of the 4 percent who passed from Zhejiang that year, but he finished a disappointing number seventy out of ninety graduates. In addition, he was one of only nine provincial graduates (10 percent) who specialized on the *Record of Rites (Liji)*.⁶⁰

By the time he passed local examinations in Yuyao county, Wang Yangming probably had memorized 145,000 words, two-thirds of them coming from the *Record of Rites*. Given its length (only the *Zuo Commentary* to the *Annals* was longer), Wang was making a minority choice when he selected the *Rites* for memorization. His choice was made easier because two of the Four Books were originally included in the *Rites*. Nevertheless, Wang Yangming was among a small group of candidates.

Eighty-five percent of the others studied the *Change*, *Documents*, or *Poetry Classic*. Competition in the wardrooms of these Classics was very high. What was lost in the longer amount of time needed to memorize the *Record of Rites* was made up for in the lower levels of competition in that classical ward.

In the 1499 metropolitan examination, Wang Yangming, then twenty-eight, was one of the twenty-two (7.3 percent) graduates out of 300 who had chosen the *Rites* for essays. His ward examiners chose Wang Yangming's essay on one of the *Rites* quotations as the best essay out of 255. This high finish in a less competitive ward enabled Wang eventually to finish second overall on the 1499 metropolitan examination. Examiners classified him as one of the top five finishers for the Five Classics.⁶¹ Had he specialized on the *Poetry Classic*, for instance, he would have had to compete with about 1,285 candidates, for the *Change* 875, and for the *Documents* 840 competitors. Wang finished ninth on the palace examination, which required a single policy essay on the uses of ritual and music to bring order to society.⁶²

In terms of classical quotas, 1499 was a typical mid-Ming provincial examination in Zhejiang. Secular trends in the choice of classical specialization by young literati allow us to describe changes in classical studies during the Ming dynasty. We know that the number of examination wards in provincial and metropolitan examinations waxed and waned based on the changing specialization rates for the Five Classics. One of the reasons for the popularity of the *Annals* in the early Ming was its patronage by the Hongwu emperor in 1395, who believed it contained the "great pattern and model of the sages."⁶³ We also know that in the early Ming, the Song dynasty Hu Anguo (1074–1138) commentary was favored over the much longer and more ancient Han dynasty commentaries.⁶⁴ This meant that early Ming students did not have to memorize the 280,000 graphs in the three Han commentaries. When questions from the *Zuo Commentary* were used, however, most candidates chose other Classics to master, leaving the *Annals* as the choice of specialization for only about 6–8 percent of the candidates after 1500.⁶⁵

Two major trends in Ming Zhejiang provincial examinations are discernible: the decline in popularity of the *Springs and Autumns* among

civil examination candidates; and the dramatic increase in the specialization rates for the *Change Classic*. Briefer trends include the fifteenth-century popularity of the *Documents Classic*; the slow decline of specialization rates for the *Poetry Classic* in the late Ming; and the fifty-year upward spike in rates for the *Rites*, which lasted in Zhejiang until 1492, when Wang Yangming chose it.

Fujian examinations during the Ming confirm these specialization trends. When further compared with Ming civil metropolitan examinations and Nanjing capital region examinations, we find that empire-wide there was a remarkable consistency in the popularity of the *Poetry Classic*. About 30–35 percent of young literati consistently chose it for their specialization. If 50,000 to 75,000 licentiates competed in late Ming triennial provincial examinations, then 15,000 to 22,500 of them had chosen the *Poetry* to memorize, in addition to the Four Books. Besides its more reasonable length (the *Poetry* was the third shortest Classic), its songlike qualities, including memory devices such as rhymes and parallel phrases, made it a favorite.

The *Documents* and *Change* Classics remained perennial favorites. As the two shortest Classics, with about 25,000 graphs each, they initially had specialization rates of over 20 percent, and rates rose to over 30 percent for each, although at different times. Whereas the popularity of the *Documents Classic* peaked in the early fifteenth century and then declined back to 20 percent in the late Ming, the *Change* reached 30 percent in the mid-Ming and stayed at that high level, challenging the *Poetry Classic* as first choice in the civil examination market, at times drawing up to 40 percent of the candidates. During the Qing dynasty, the rates of specialization remained consistent. Provinces were expected to conform, more or less, to acceptable percentages. A quota was adopted to ensure that there would be provincial and palace graduates from all the Classics, despite the popularity of the *Change*, *Poetry*, and *Documents* Classics. Officials feared that if Ming dynasty trends continued, the three shortest Classics would surpass the 85 percent allotment granted to them as a whole, and almost no one would study the *Annals* or *Record of Rites*.

Seventeenth-century literati such as Gu Yanwu had already critiqued Ming classical learning for its superficiality and blamed this in part on the

specialization policy. Fewer candidates had a comprehensive knowledge of the Classics. Others such as Huang Zongxi (1610–1695) also encouraged a reemphasis on the Five Classics. In the 1681 Jiangnan provincial examination, for instance, Zhu Yizun (1629–1709) as the examiner prepared one of the policy questions to query the candidates on the specialization requirement.⁶⁶ A consensus among literati emerged slowly in the eighteenth century that mastery of only one Classic was insufficient. Literati convinced the Qing government that all the Classics should be learned by all candidates.⁶⁷

A special category was established in 1724 for candidates who mastered all of the Five Classics. The Yongzheng emperor added five such graduates to the regular degree quota for most provinces. Special “Five Classics” candidates were encouraged to write all essays on each of the Classics, instead of only on a single Classic. If they did this successfully on the first session, in addition to preparing the mandatory essays on the Four Books, then they were exempted from all but the documentary questions on the second and third sessions of provincial and metropolitan examinations.⁶⁸ Some 8.2 percent of the candidates in the 1735 Shuntian examination chose this new path, which required memorizing 440,000 graphs compared with the typical 100,000 to 115,000 memorized by those who wrote essays on the Four Books and one of the three shortest Classics. Less than 5 percent in Jiangnan followed this new educational path in the 1740s, a figure that is confirmed in the 1742 metropolitan examination in Beijing.⁶⁹

The court completed reforms to encourage classical studies in three stages over three decades between 1756 and 1786. In 1787, the court decided to move the poetry question, required since 1756, from session two to session one to balance the Four Books, a move that infuriated Qing literati who supported “Way learning” essays. The addition of regulated verse to the curriculum entailed that all candidates, from local to metropolitan examinations, had to master collections of Tang and Song ancient-style poetry, most notably the recently reedited “Three Hundred Tang Poems” (*Tangshi sanbai shou*).⁷⁰

The Qianlong emperor decided to phase in from 1788 to 1793 the requirement that all literati must master each of the Five Classics. Given

the formidable length of the Five Classics, it was impossible to change the memorization habits of students overnight. After 1793, the classical memorization requirements for higher degrees increased fourfold for young candidates, to which was added the requirement since 1756 that candidates also learn hundreds of Tang and Song ancient-style poems.⁷¹ Such changes impacted literati by increasing the number of years of classical study required to master the examination curriculum, which translated into higher ages among the provincial and capital degree graduates.

The sobering results outlined above were more than just statistics. As the examinations eliminated more and more candidates, with less than 1 percent passing provincial examinations, for instance, the cultural impact of the examination's results were redirected into the realms of religion and mantic techniques. Therapeutic ways to deal with examination failure and to persevere in the quest for fame and fortune became dynamic cultural forms for dealing with and superseding the social and political statistics. We must put a face on the numbers.

Religion and Examinations

The search for examination success created a climate of rising expectations among low-level licentiates who dreamed of examination glory but sometimes rebelled when their hopes were dashed. The examinations, although unobtainable for them, affected even peasant belief in the value of education. In the popular imagination, Chinese used “fate” (*ming*) to explain the social and cultural trends and inherent inequalities in the selection process. Many accepted their success or failure because they believed that the gods had determined the rankings beforehand.⁷² Elites, when unsuccessful in the examination competition, invoked fate to explain why others, who were not superior, succeeded.⁷³ Faced with uncertainties, many literati, merchants, artisans, and peasants turned to gods, temples, and local religious practices for guidance. An educational regime, which tested a classical canon and had forbidden Daoist and Buddhist monks from entering the examination hall and kept their published patrologies from inclusion in the official curriculum, was still imbued with so many religious sensibilities that there were no clear markers between religious

and examination life. During the Tang, an imperial decree required examination candidates be lodged at the Guangzhai Temple if they were unable to return home after an examination lasting into the evening. During the Song dynasty, literati temples honoring Confucius became venues of prayer before examinations.⁷⁴

To cope with educational and examination pressures, candidates since the Tang and Song appealed to local deities for moral support. Religious practices redirected the candidate's anxieties to help him in the examination market. The Daoist cult of Wenchang, the patron deity of the literary arts since medieval times, became an object of veneration by the Southern Song because of the deity's ability to predict examination success. The Yuan dynasty granted official recognition to the cult.⁷⁵

The "Cinnamon Record" (*Guiji*) in the 1181 revelatory *Book of Transformations* (*Huashu*) stipulated Wenchang's spiritual role in civil examinations.⁷⁶ His efficacy was concretely demonstrated in a story included in the 1194 continuation of the *Book of Transformations* about a talented candidate who had consulted with a Daoist priest to find out why after four decades he had still not gotten the palace degree. The priest checked with Wenchang and learned the following story:

When Li Teng was first born he was bestowed a jade seal and was fated to place first on the district examinations at eighteen and be *optimus* at the palace examinations at age nineteen. At thirty-three he should have reached the rank of chancellor of the right. After being selected he spied on a neighbor woman, Zhang Yanniang. Although the affair had not been resolved, he had her father, Zhang Cheng, bound and thrown into jail. For this crime his success was postponed ten years, and he was demoted to the second group of successful examinees. After being selected at the age of twenty-eight, he encroached upon and seized the dwelling of his elder brother, Li Feng, and this resulted in litigation. For this his success was postponed another ten years, and he was demoted to the third group of graduates. After being selected at the age of thirty-eight, he violated Madame née Zheng, the wife of a commoner, in his room in Chang'an and then framed her husband, Bai Yuan, for a crime. For this his success was postponed a further ten years, and his standing was

demoted to the fourth group. After being selected at the age of forty-eight, he stole Qingniang, the maiden daughter of his neighbor Wang Chi. As an unrepentant evil-doer, he has already been erased from the records. He will never pass.

Such moral rigor unequivocally valorized the popular meaning and ethical significance of the classical examinations and rationalized the examiners' rankings in light of cosmological justice, not essay content or writing technique.⁷⁷

Fifteenth-century accounts of examination candidates frequently mentioned visits to Wenchang temples in their community or on their way to provincial or metropolitan examinations. In 1454, the heralded Ming scholar-official Qiu Jun (see Chapter 1) was still preparing for the metropolitan examinations ten years after he had finished first on the Guangdong provincial examination. In a dream, Qiu allegedly spoke with Wenchang, who praised Qiu for his sincerity and promised that Qiu would pass the upcoming examination and receive his palace degree ranked one of the top graduates. It became de rigueur for Ming candidates such as Yang Qiyuan (1547–1599), who as a Wang Yangming follower was known to insert Chan Buddhist doctrine into his examination essays, to claim they passed only after consulting Wenchang.⁷⁸

Guandi, the god of war and sometimes wealth, was a deified historical figure frequently invoked by Ming and Qing examination candidates. Guandi was apotheosized in medieval times from the loyal warrior-official Guan Yu, romanticized in the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, to Lord Guan, a deity that pitied humans and granted merchants wealth and literati examination success.⁷⁹ His empire-wide cult “glorified the loyal and rewarded the good” by measuring human acts according to the “standards of merit and evil.” During the Qing, the Yongzheng emperor organized the Guandi cult into an empire-wide hierarchy of temples, for which the court acted as official guardians.⁸⁰

In 1547, for example, it was noted that Guandi repaid an examination candidate, Zhang Chun, with provincial and metropolitan success, after the god asked Zhang in a dream to treat his ear illness. Zhang was staying in a temple that had an image of Guandi, and after awakening Zhang discovered that the ear on the image was plugged with bee honey, which

he removed. The next night Zhang dreamed that Guandi had thanked him for his cure and that Guandi would not forget Zhang's kind act. In the late Ming, a chronically ill licentiate dreamed that Guandi had told him he would recover and pass the next examination, but later due to his avarice after recovering, he failed, according to Guandi, so that heaven's principles would not be harmed. Guandi explained himself when the candidate came to the temple and used bamboo sticks to divine why he had failed the examination. Later in 1619, eight graduates of the metropolitan examination were on a list of graduates that Guandi had presented in a dream.⁸¹

Another prominent examination cult was devoted to the early Ming official Yu Qian (1398–1457). During the Oirat campaign and debacle of 1449, when the Ming emperor was captured, Yu and others in the court had replaced the Zhengtong emperor (r. 1436–1449), before he was ransomed. The new Jingtai emperor (r. 1450–1456) then led the successful defense of Beijing. After returning and spending several years as a prince, the former emperor retook the throne in 1457 in a coup d'état, after which Yu Qian and other officials, who had sacrificed their emperor in 1449, were accused of treason and executed. Yu's name was rehabilitated in 1466, and his son petitioned in 1489 to establish a memorial shrine for his father in his native Hangzhou near Yu Qian's grave site. Another shrine honoring him was erected in Beijing.⁸²

Yu Qian's localized grave site and shrine in Hangzhou became a popular venue for Zhejiang examination candidates to stop on their way to the provincial and metropolitan examinations. They would implore the spirit of Yu Qian for guidance and signs of future examination success. As with Guandi, Yu Qian's loyal acts transcended his times, and his pure spirit could affect the fates of others. Many candidates associated their subsequent successes with dreams while staying in the Hangzhou shrine. The 1652 *optimus*, Zou Zhongyi, for example, although he was from Jiangsu province, linked his success with a visit to the Yu shrine as a boy, where he had dreamed Yu Qian told him his future ranking.⁸³

Popular Lore and Religion

Religious cults were honored in Qing times with the visits of examination candidates seeking the intervention of Wenchang, Guandi, and Yu

Qian. Published collections emphasized the otherworldly aspects of the examination market. These popular perceptions reverberated inside and outside the examination compounds. Given the expansion of the examinations to counties, departments, and prefectures on a regular basis, and the increase in the number of candidates empire-wide, Ming accounts increased so dramatically that examiners made religious anomalies a frequent object of questioning in the examinations themselves.⁸⁴

Buddhist and Daoist temples also served as spiritual sites to help literati cope with the emotional demands of the civil examinations. Usually the temples overlapped with the empire-wide Wenchang and Guandi shrines. Guandi, for example, was already appropriated as a Buddhist deity in the Tang, and during the late empire his forbidding statue stood guard at most Buddhist temples.⁸⁵ In 1550, a Buddhist monk used physiognomy (*xiang*) to predict the examination success of Xu Zhongxing (1517–1578) in the forthcoming 1550 metropolitan examination. The monk told Xu that he was destined to remain a provincial degree-holder for the rest of his life and never hold an office higher than county magistrate. When Xu indicated displeasure, the monk told him that “hidden virtue” was required to escape the “fixed regularities” of his physiognomy. Xu agreed, and although he was poor, he collected thirty taels of gold from his writing talents and secretly dropped it into Lake Tai for the fish. When the monk saw Xu again, he immediately saw “hidden virtue” in his countenance and declared that he would become a palace graduate the next year.

Xu Zhongxing became a high court official. The story of his changing fate is a parable about the examination market in the late Ming silver age.⁸⁶ This moral inversion of the corrupt uses of gold and silver to buy examination success by paying off examiners could also take the form of “spirit-money” used in temples and shrines to honor the dead and to redeem one’s moral debts. In Xu’s case of “good deeds,” the gold, like spirit-money, translated into a spiritual payment that yielded worldly success. Just as cultural resources invested in a classical education were the linguistic key to a candidate’s examination success, so too investments in shrines and temples and faith in spiritual matters brought peace of mind, hope, and solace in the face of examination failure.⁸⁷

Similarly in 1594, a Daoist scolded Zhang Weiyan, who after seeing the results posted, slandered the civil examiners for failing him on the provincial examination. The Daoist priest laughed at Zhang and claimed that he could tell from Zhang's physiognomy that his essays were not outstanding. When Zhang angrily asked the priest how he knew, the Daoist replied that essay writing required spiritual peace and equanimity. Zhang then asked for guidance, and the Daoist told him that heaven established fate on the basis of good works. Zhang retorted that he was a poor literatus and could not afford to practice good deeds, to which the Daoist appealed to a notion of "hidden merit" that emanated from the mind. Such unlimited merit was not based on wealth but on emotional maturity and spiritual peace, the Daoist contended, and Zhang had wasted his energies by attacking his examiners. Zhang was enlightened. Later in 1597, Zhang dreamed that the provincial examination roster that year was still missing one name for someone who could accumulate virtue. Zhang fulfilled the requirement and passed.⁸⁸

In this episode, the Daoist ideals of spiritual enlightenment appealed to a high-strung candidate who spent years preparing for the provincial examination and could not accept his failure. Not only were religion and morality the proper way to deal with failure, but success was ultimately tied to spiritual enlightenment and emotional maturity. Religion for literati provided a healthy psychological haven from the cruel realities of the examination compound.

Morality was another typical measure of examination success. Before the 1481 metropolitan examination, Wang Yangming's father, Wang Hua, stayed with a wealthy family whose master was sonless, although he had many concubines. One evening the master sent one of the concubines to Wang's room with a note claiming the idea as his own. Wang refused the liaison, writing in reply that this would "alarm the heavens." The next day a Daoist was invited into the house to pray for the ancestors, but he fell into a deep sleep. On awakening, the priest related that he had attended an examination in heaven, where the *optimus* was announced. The Daoist remembered in the dream that the procession in front of the man was carrying a banner that read "alarm the heavens."⁸⁹

Karma and retribution were also cultural constructs used to elucidate the examination market. Yuan Huang (1533–1606), a leader of late Ming

efforts to link Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, encouraged the use of morality books (*shanshu*) to measure an individual's societal status and worth. Yuan contended that "success in the examinations depended entirely on secret virtue." He also maintained that such success did not depend on a candidate's ability but rather on his ancestors' store of merit. "Ledgers of merit and demerit," as Yuan Huang and his moral bookkeeping followers called them, became the literati equivalent to the popular notions of good works, moral rebirth, and worldly success.⁹⁰

In an examination market in which candidates for the highest degrees regarded their levels of classical literacy as roughly equivalent, most explained in religious terms why one failed and another passed.⁹¹ During the late Ming, the doctrines of Chinese religion, particularly those of Chan Buddhism, even entered the actual content of the examination essays, but the candidates were still able to honor the required "Way learning" curriculum in their classical essays while their mental lives betrayed a much wider source of inspiration.

Many literati believed in reincarnation. In the 1642 provincial examinations, a candidate received prior information about the questions from an auspicious woman who appeared in his dreams and turned out to have died the day the candidate was born.⁹² Some claimed that certain coincidences in the life of the 1659 metropolitan *optimus*, Zhu Jin, indicated that he was reincarnated from a century earlier.⁹³ As a boy of three and four, Chen Yuanlong (1652–1736) dreamed of Buddhist chants, but his mother urged him toward literati studies instead, claiming that the teachings of Buddhism were not worth following. When she passed away, Chen still refused to take any examinations. The head monitor of the Kangxi emperor's special 1679 examination encouraged Chen to accept an invitation to participate but to no avail, but he later changed his mind and unexpectedly finished third on the 1685 palace examination and held high office. The tensions of Buddhism versus an official life took Chen Yuanlong several years to resolve.⁹⁴

The contest between this-worldly success and otherworldly enlightenment often challenged family values. Buddhist and Daoist clergy encouraged men and women to steer clear of social entanglements in favor of celibacy.⁹⁵ Even when this religious ideal was compromised, a fictional heroine such as Fragrance ("Xiangnü") in *Liu Xiang's Precious*

Scroll (Liu Xiang baojuan), first published in the eighteenth century, could dismiss her husband's examination aspirations by saying, "What's the use of reading books? . . . It's better to study the Way; profit lies therein. To be an official for one life is to gain enemies for ten thousand lifetimes." Fragrance's mother-in-law, enraged, forbade her son from seeing his wife and ordered him to prepare for the examination. Eventually he became an *optimus*, but his and his family's fate was an early death ordained by the Jade Emperor.⁹⁶ Fragrance, in contrast, became a sainted religious leader who overcame all worldly obstacles.

The dark side of these uplifting tales was the alleged criminal reasons for examination failure. A son dreamed of his dead mother, who told him that his crime of three lives past had come to light. He could not enter school and learn to read until he had expiated his past crimes. Inside the examination compound, ghosts and apparitions from the past appeared before candidates to remind them of past transgressions. In these stories, many such young men went crazy or died on the spot.⁹⁷ In fact, many candidates accepted gossip about a custom that had supposedly developed among examination proctors who unfurled black and red banners after the roll call inside the compound while they called out: "Wrongs will be righted; those aggrieved will take revenge."⁹⁸

Spirits and ghosts could also play tricks with a candidate's mind, testing his emotional mettle. Wenchang could predict that a candidate's papers in the 1640 metropolitan examination would catch fire from the small stove in his cell and be destroyed, so that he must prepare two copies and keep one in reserve. The candidate obeyed, a fire did burn up his papers, and he passed because of his reserve copy.⁹⁹ A spirit could give a candidate the wrong questions for an examination in order to ensure that he would be unprepared and that someone else would come out number one.¹⁰⁰ Spirits could likewise affect the examiners, as in 1726 when Zhang Lei allegedly relied on the spirits to ferret out the best paper with "hidden virtue" in the Nanjing provincial examination.¹⁰¹ In the 1783 Jiangxi provincial examination, the examiners were reported to have chosen the top paper because of a dream one of the examiners had. In 1804 a spirit appeared in a provincial examiner's dream and explained the classical merits of a particular essay to him. The spirit pointed out that the candidate had successfully used an important etymological dictionary for his 8-legged essay.¹⁰²

In 1657, a candidate in the provincial examinations had completed his essays and was waiting in his cell for them to be collected when the god of literature danced in before his eyes and said that he would be the *optimus* on this cycle of civil examinations. The spirit asked the candidate to write the two characters for *optimus* (*zhuangyuan*) on its own piece of paper. The candidate was elated at this auspicious news and began to write the first character *zhuang*, when suddenly the god tipped over the inkstone and left. Because of the ink marks on his official papers, the candidate was disqualified from consideration.¹⁰³

Earlier in a 1618 provincial examination, the ending had been different. A candidate had been ill inside the examination compound and fallen into a deep sleep without writing any of his essays. After handing in a blank paper to the collection clerks, the candidate assumed he had failed, but later he learned that his name was on the final list of graduates. When he looked at his examination papers, he discovered that the essays had been written down in proper regular script, which he attributed to a helpful spirit in his cell.¹⁰⁴

A profligate life usually led to failure. In 1664, a candidate while waiting for the results of the metropolitan examination got drunk and passed out. During his stupor, he recalled his past unfilial behavior toward his mother and father, and on awakening discovered he had failed.¹⁰⁵ During the 1849 Nanjing provincial examination, a candidate from the illustrious Xu family in Kunshan county, which had garnered several palace degree-holders early in the dynasty, went drinking after the second session, thinking that his high ranking had already been sealed by the essays on the Four Books and Five Classics. He drank himself into a stupor and was unable to meet the roll call to enter the compound and complete the third session's required policy questions. The examiners initially had ranked his 8-legged essays ahead of the eventual *optimus*, but because his final papers had not been handed in, he was disqualified.¹⁰⁶

A reformed life, however, led to success. In a great turnabout, Zhang Zhidong (1837–1909) gave up his heavy drinking as a youth after one of his elders in his lineage, Zhang Zhiwan (1811–1897), finished as the empire's *optimus* in 1847. Determined to emulate Zhiwan, Zhang finished first on the Shuntian provincial examination in 1852 but finished only third on the 1863 palace examination. Despite his success, Zhang Zhi-dong's failure to win the coveted status of *optimus* was attributed to his

early addiction to drinking. He became a leading political reformer during the late Qing Self-Strengthening Movement.¹⁰⁷

Sexual promiscuity also loomed large in the popular view of examination failure. The candidate who abstained from sex the night before the 1612 Nanjing provincial examination was rewarded with the highest examination honors, and the one who indulged lost out.¹⁰⁸ A jilted woman often returned to haunt a candidate in his examination cell, dooming him to failure. Or if she had committed suicide, she could return as a temptress, seduce her tormentor, and leave him for dead.¹⁰⁹ Another common theme was possession, in which a fox fairy invaded the candidate's body and took over his mind. In 1879, a fairy began speaking in a Jiangxi dialect through the mouth of a candidate from Hangzhou and had to be appeased with watermelons before she would depart, taking the form of a young wife as she left.¹¹⁰

The complex institutional machinery and rigorous curricular content of the civil examinations discussed in earlier chapters were elided in non-official culture and were replaced by morality tales that fit in with the themes of fairness and justice in government and society. These entertaining collections "recording unusual matters heard in the examination grounds" reveal, however, that elites and commoners accepted the civil examinations as a natural part of life and infused them with a religious and cosmological narrative that fully accepted the examination regime and legitimated its place in society.¹¹¹ The therapeutic uses of religion in Ming morality books, sometimes described as the "management of moral capital," carried over to the examination life. The reorganization of one's emotional experiences as a candidate accompanied changes in character ideals to deal with panic and failure. Daoist and Buddhist parables about examination success or failure also provided a compelling communal purpose, which helped men cope and understand themselves better.¹¹²

Techniques for Examination Prediction

To cope with civil examinations, candidates and their families also used techniques to communicate with the other world to predict success or failure, to gather clues about the possible quotations from the

Four Books that the examiners might select, or to divine the riddle a fortune-teller or dream had elicited from the gods, spirits, and ancestors. “Reading fate” (*kanming*) became an obsession among Ming-Qing examination candidates as they sought auspicious signs of their prospects.¹¹³

Mantic techniques for analyzing civil examinations took many cultural forms, the chief among them being fate prediction using the *Change Classic* (*Yijing*), physiognomy,¹¹⁴ spirit-writing,¹¹⁵ deciphering written words, dream interpretation, sighting of portents, and geomancy (*fengshui*). Each was practiced in a variety of ways.¹¹⁶ The remarkable degree to which daily life, Buddhist and Daoist religion, and elite activities interacted in these mantic devices reveals the limits of our usual stress on Confucian agnosticism.¹¹⁷ Late imperial examiners tried unsuccessfully to set intellectual limits to such popular techniques, but even in the policy questions they devised for civil examinations designed to show the folly of blindly accepting correlations between earthly and otherworldly events, they were trying to influence a world of discourse largely out of their control.

On the basis of their acceptance of the Buddhist and Daoist doctrines of karma and moral retribution, which had become a part of Ming examination life, candidates tried to discern how their “individual fates” (*yuanfen*, lit., “karmic allotments”) could be calculated using the methods of fate extrapolation, auspicious versus inauspicious day selection, or the eight characters (*bazi*) of a person’s birth. Fortune-tellers, Buddhist monks, and Daoist priests widely used astrology, complete with Chinese horoscopes. These were drawn on a divination method using milfoil weeds, whose numerological patterns were designed to correlate with the numerical system in the hexagrams of the *Change Classic*.¹¹⁸

Fate calculations were so common during the Ming that an illustrated seventeenth-century record of all Ming *optimi* to 1640 included the eight-character, stem-branch (*tiangan dizhi*, lit., “heavenly stems and earthly branches”) combinations for dating each *optimus*’s birth by year, month, day, and hour according to the conventional divination method. The four pairs of stem-branch characters, used in the orthodox calendar and in all almanacs, were known as the “four pillars” of one’s fate and correlated with one’s future official position, wealth, and social standing.¹¹⁹

The Ming collection added information for each *optimus*, such as bureaucratic rank, punishments received, and early death, where appropriate, to show the correlations between their birth dates and their fates. The compilers also added a commentary to explain the fate calculations for many of the *optimi*.¹²⁰

Fortune-tellers also employed star-based techniques to link an individual's fate to the heavens and the likelihood of examination success. These techniques usually incorporated astrological signs, each identified with one of twelve animals (rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig), which correlated with the twelve earthly branches. For example, one of the illustrations (see Figure 5.4) included in the Ming collection entitled *Illustrated Survey of Optimi during the Ming dynasty* (*Ming zhuangyuan tukao*) shows a diviner pointing out to the 1502 *optimus* Kang Hai (1475–1541) that the Little Dipper in the heavens has guaranteed his examination success.¹²¹

According to the diviner, the god of literature was then residing in a place favorable for a candidate from the Northwest, and since Kang Hai was from Shaanxi his fortune was more auspicious than those who came from the South. The god of literature was associated with the Little Dipper in the southern skies, and Kang Hai's fortune was read in accordance with the traditional mantic view that the Southern Dipper guaranteed high official position, reward as a palace degree-holder, and a high salary.¹²²

Fortune-tellers widely practiced *Yijing* divination, and candidates often consulted the *Change Classic* for hints about their future success. Frequently such divinations took place in Guandi temples, where bamboo sticks were used to determine auspicious years for candidates that were related to their eight-character birth information (see Figure 5.5).¹²³

Fortune-tellers drew their judgments from random drawings of one of the hexagrams and then determining the multivalent symbolism contained in the patterns among the 384 lines, 128 trigrams, and 64 hexagrams, relationships that were thought to be the keys to making the correct prognostication. Mantic techniques for divination using the *Yijing* were also based on milfoil stalks or bamboo sticks that were shaken to select out one for fate calculations.¹²⁴

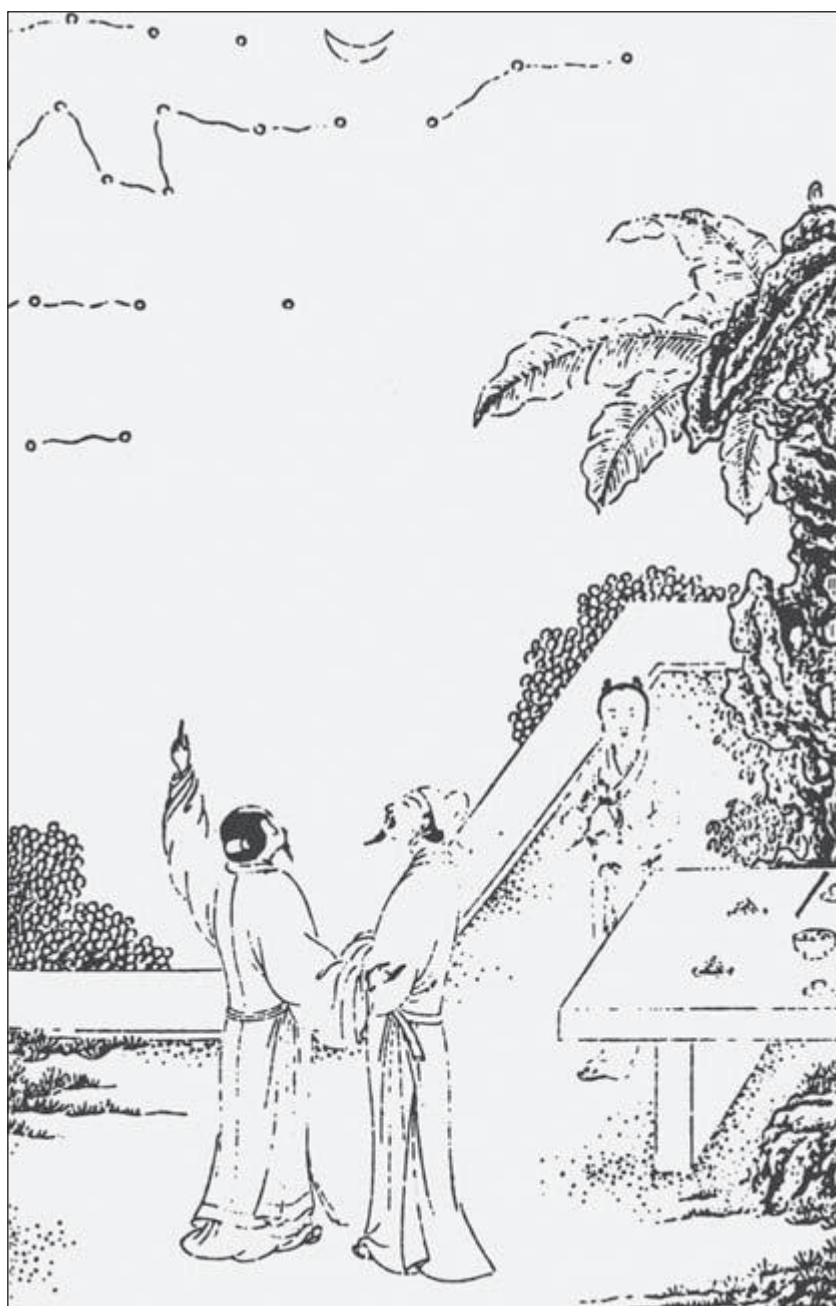


Figure 5.4. Pointing to the Little Dipper in 1502. *Ming zhuangyuan tukao* [Illustrated survey of *optimi* during the Ming dynasty]. Compiled by Gu Dingchen and Gu Zuxun. 1607 edition.



Figure 5.5. Using bamboo sticks to divine examination success in Qing times. *Dianshizhai huabao* [The Dianshi Pavilion's pictorial], serial 2, vol. 11 (1897), *chou*, pp. 57b–58a. Reprinted by Yangzhou: Jiangsu Rare Books, 1983.

Spirit-writing, whereby a spirit medium passively transmitted messages using a divining instrument, had been applied to civil examinations since the Tang and Song dynasties. During the Song, spirit-writers added the composition of poetry and other literary forms, which required mediums to be masters of the poetic forms used in the belles lettres portions of the examinations.¹²⁵ By the late Ming, although the

civil examinations no longer required poetry, this method of communicating with the other world was used to produce books of moral teachings authored by the spirits themselves. It was both natural and culturally acceptable for examination candidates on their way to a local, provincial, or metropolitan civil examination to visit temples known to be auspicious and to ask the medium there for advance notice of the examination questions. Often the interrogator and the spirit exchanged poetic couplets to demonstrate their classical erudition and poetic flair. It was also common for the audience to assume that the spirit who wrote through the planchette was a famous writer.¹²⁶

For example, a candidate on his way to the 1688 metropolitan examination in Beijing stopped to ask a medium to communicate with the “writing spirit” and ask it to predict the upcoming quotations from the Four Books that would appear on the first session of the examination. The spirit replied via the medium by writing on the planchette the two characters for “I don’t know” (*buzhi*). The candidate then asked the spirit: “How is it that the spirits and worthies have no way of knowing?” The medium then recorded the spirit’s second reply: “I don’t know. I don’t know. And again I don’t know” (*buzhi, buzhi, you buzhi*).

Meanwhile, a crowd, including other examination candidates, gathered in the temple. They were amused at the spirit’s profession of ignorance and remained unenlightened. When the candidate was in his examination cell, however, he suddenly realized that the spirit had correctly predicted what the first quotation from the Four Books would be. It was taken from the last chapter of Confucius’s *Analects*, which included three variants of “I don’t know” in the quotation: “Confucius said, ‘*Not knowing* fate, a man has no way of becoming a gentleman; *not knowing* the rites, he has no way of taking a stand; *not knowing* words, he has no way of judging people.’” The required quotation for the first 8-legged essay included the phrase “*buzhi*” three times. The candidate’s failure to recognize what the spirit was saying also demonstrated his deficiencies as a gentleman who did not know his own fate.¹²⁷

One of the interesting developments that set the classical and literary context for spirit-writing was changes in the actual curriculum of examinations over the centuries. In the turn from Tang-Song belles lettres to Ming-Qing classical essays, not only did candidates have to adjust their

study of the classical canon, but spirits (particularly their mediums) also had to keep up with the classical curriculum, if they hoped to provide the proper guidance when implored for the forthcoming examination questions. Hence, from 1370 until 1756, it made little linguistic sense for mediums to transmit specific poetry lines when queried about the examinations, because poetry was not tested again until after 1756. Their opinions on most matters, however, still were expressed using poetic forms.¹²⁸

In a local temple, for instance, a candidate once asked the medium to predict questions for the upcoming 1843 Zhejiang provincial examination. Suddenly the god Guandi took hold of the medium and wrote out a reply on the planchette that alluded to the likely questions, but Guandi added: “I do not read the *Springs and Autumns* annals.” The candidate did not know what this meant until he noted while taking the second session of the provincial examination, which after 1787 required candidates to master all Five Classics, that Guandi had successfully predicted the quotations from the *Change*, *Documents*, *Poetry*, and *Rites* classics. Only the quotation from the *Annals* was missing from Guandi’s prediction, which suggested that Guandi had preferred it when the curriculum had allowed candidates to specialize on one of the Classics. Like the candidates, Guandi now had to master all Five Classics. Before 1756, few candidates, like Guandi, had mastered the *Annals* because of its length.¹²⁹

The period after 1740 brought changes in the civil examination curriculum, which included the addition of a required poetry question in regulated verse in 1756. The Ancient Learning scholar Ji Yun (1724–1805) was baffled when he and a group of scholars gathered around a spirit-writing medium near West Lake in Hangzhou late in the eighteenth century. The poem that appeared through the medium alluded to a famous medieval courtesan and poet whose grave site was nearby and who they thought was likely the spirit writing the poem.¹³⁰

What troubled Ji Yun was that the poem composed was written in Tang regulated verse, a form that had not been invented during the Southern Qi dynasty (479–502), when the spirit lived. “How is it you are able to compose regulated verse?” Ji Yun asked. The spirit-poet replied that spirits also kept up with the times even though they lived in the

other world. Ji Yun then asked the spirit-poet to compose lines in the Southern Qi dynasty style, which she successfully did via the medium. Still not convinced that the spirit they were communicating with was the actual Six Dynasties courtesan Little Su, Ji Yun concluded that it was more likely that she was being impersonated by an unknown ghost from a later period, one that knew Tang regulated verse very well—and one that could provide late eighteenth-century examination candidates with predictions of the lines of Tang verse needed for the new poetry question.¹³¹

Similar to spirit-writing, the technique known as “deciphering written words,” which came from a medium or appeared in a dream, replicated the six paleographical rules of written graph formation in use since Xu Shen during the Han had classified almost 10,000 different characters by sound and structure according to 530 radicals. Such philologically technical word analysis was appropriated in popular culture by fortune-tellers and diviners to decipher the cryptic messages received via spirit-writing.¹³²

The semantic radical component and its complementary phonetic component, which had been used by classicists to determine the ancient meaning of the graph, could be turned inside out by clever predictors of fate, who broke characters down into their structural components and then recombined them in efforts to fathom the secret message or pun that was being transmitted through them. In 1406, for example, the Fujian literatus Lin Huan dreamt (see Figure 5.6) that when he was about to take the spring metropolitan and palace examinations, his friend sent him some dog meat. Later Lin realized that this had been an auspicious omen and that he had been destined by fate to become the 1406 *optimus*.

When the character *quan* for dog was analyzed by Lin and his Hanlin colleagues, they saw first that it was the right side of the character for *zhuang* in *zhuangyuan* (*optimus*). Second, the character for dog was itself both the organizing radical and the first character under the radical for *zhuang*. These two methods confirmed that Lin Huan had been assured of becoming the *optimus*. In essence, this approach gave the interpreter free rein to construct plausible dissections of characters to suit his immediate needs.¹³³



Figure 5.6. Sending dog meat in 1406. *Ming zhuangyuan tukao* [Illustrated survey of *optimi* during the Ming dynasty]. Compiled by Gu Dingchen and Gu Zuxun. 1607 edition.

Because so much in fate calculations depended on one's birth date and identity, another common technique candidates used was to change their fates or escape an inauspicious spirit-writing session by modifying their names (see Chapter 1). A name change served candidates as an identity change, which would reconfigure their karmic allotments. Or the change could allow them to take advantage of an auspicious fate awaiting someone who met the criteria of a particular surname or given name. To dream of the "heavenly rankings," as many candidates did, was to see the final earthly rankings in advance.¹³⁴ In many cases, the change of name was simply a strategic decision based on a prophetic dream or a political decision to avoid possible misunderstandings if one's name carried double meanings.¹³⁵

Disappearances and replacements were another variation to the theme of changing one's fate. In the interesting story of Zhou Kechang by Pu Songling, a young boy disappeared and was secretly replaced by his ghost. The ghost grew up diligent and passed the examinations. Although he married, Zhou as a ghost never consummated his marriage and was berated by his mother for not providing the family with an heir. When the real Zhou reappeared, a second exchange was arranged with the merchant who had adopted him. The real Zhou then replaced the ghost and fathered an heir, and the Zhou family was granted double success: "success in the examinations and bliss in the bedroom." Although studious, the ghost outlived his usefulness. Such stories reflected the practical uses of identity change, in which the other world was brought into this world as an ally to achieve examination success.¹³⁶

Similarly, the use of geomancy to site auspicious locations for tombs, houses, and temples extended to the examination market. Famous geomancers were sought after because of their success in selecting auspicious ancestral lands. Such grave sites were thought to yield examination success as well, given the carryover between the generations that was assumed in the practice of ancestor worship. We have seen that Yuan Huang taught that examination success depended not on a candidate's ability but rather on his ancestors' store of merit. Late imperial literati saw many pragmatic and therapeutic reasons to draw on such techniques, which added to the repertoire of religion in appealing to Han and non-Han elites.¹³⁷

Dreams and Aspirations of Ming Optimi

The most representative form of communication with the other world since antiquity was the dream.¹³⁸ Dream interpretations and the sighting of portents in the dreams of examination candidates, common in medieval China,¹³⁹ became sophisticated cultural forms in Ming times.¹⁴⁰ Even Zhu Yuanzhang, the first emperor of the Ming, recorded one of his own dreams for his imperial writings. In the dream, Zhu revisited his life one year before becoming emperor, when there were several signs he was destined to unite China. The signs were laid out as they were in popular religion and literati life. First a fairy crane sent by the immortals appeared in the dream (compare with Figure 5.7), which led Zhu into visions of Buddhist guardians and Daoist priests. The latter presented him with a crimson robe and a sword. They then told him to move on. The dream legitimated the rags-to-riches tale of a peasant boy designated by the darker world to become the founder of a new, “bright” (*Ming*) dynasty in the visible world.¹⁴¹

Produced under the enormous mental pressures of civil examinations, the visions late imperial literati projected in dreams provide us with a unique window to gauge their conceptual world through language and visual imagery. The dream market, which involved “sleep meditation” as a religious form, played right into the social and political dynamics of the examination market. These dreams, which resulted in personal gains and losses, were also expressed in humorous terms.¹⁴²

For instance, the poet-calligrapher Ho Shaoji (1799–1873), some time before the 1820 metropolitan examination, had a dream in which he reached a market where there were many steamed rolls (*mantou*). After choosing one roll to eat and finishing it, he took another, when suddenly a stranger came by and stole it from him (See Figure 5.8). Later Ho realized that the thief was the eventual 1820 *optimus*, who changed his name after taking first place in the provincial examination to ensure his finishing first on both the palace and metropolitan examinations. Ho admitted that he had met his match, as the dream had suggested. Ho finished first on the 1835 provincial examination, represented by the steamed bun he had eaten in the dream, but in the 1836 metropolitan and palace examinations he could not duplicate the *optimus*’s feat of “three firsts.” The second steamed roll had gone to the 1820 *optimus*.¹⁴³



Figure 5.7. A yellow crane appears in 1505. *Ming zhuangyuan tukao* [Illustrated survey of *optimi* during the Ming dynasty]. Compiled by Gu Dingchen and Gu Zuxun. 1607 edition.



Figure 5.8. A two-headed horseman in 1583. *Ming zhuangyuan tukao* [Illustrated survey of *optimi* during the Ming dynasty]. Compiled by Gu Dingchen and Gu Zuxun. 1607 edition.

Han Chinese regarded the dream as a message from the spirit-world, which complemented fate prediction, spirit-writing, geomancy, physiognomy, and the deciphering of written words in communicating with that world.¹⁴⁴ Those who visited temples overnight went to “pray for dreams” and engage in “sleep meditation.” They thought temple dreams invoked by prayer were the best means to communicate with Wenchang, Guandi, or other gods and worthies associated with a particular temple. At times, the hypnotic arts were added to map out dreams and lay bear the meanings of what people said they saw in their visions. The Hangzhou temple to the martyred Ming minister Yu Qian, for instance, became a center for sleep meditation and dream incubation, an examination tradition that lasted into the twentieth century.¹⁴⁵

Literati also cited dreams as a therapeutic device outside the examination market for healing and restoration of health.¹⁴⁶ Zhang Fengyi (1527–1613) compiled a collection entitled *Classified Studies of Dream Interpretations* (*Mengzhan leikao*) after recovering from his trip to Beijing in 1565 to pass the metropolitan examination. Despondent and prone to drinking after his failure, he remained very ill until late in 1567, when he dreamed of visiting the Eight Immortals of the Quanzhen (Complete Truth) sect of Daoism. In the dream, the Celestial Master Lü Dongbin took Zhang’s pulse and gave him a white pill, which eventually helped him to recover. Zhang failed the metropolitan examination four times before retiring to a life of leisure and opera writing in his native Suzhou. His collection of dream interpretations was inspired by his 1565–1567 tribulations.¹⁴⁷

Chen Shiyuan’s 1562 compilation, *Remaining Points on Dream Interpretation* (*Mengzhan yizhi*), laid out in rich historical detail the two major traditions of dream interpretation in imperial China: the dream as prophecy and the dream as illusion. In the examination market, unlike in the literary world, the dream functioned mainly as a form of communication with the other world. Although different, dreams and conscious perception (*jue*) were forms of realization that added to human knowledge (*zhi*) of fate and prognostication. In Chen’s view, “there were early auspicious signs for all examination rankings and salary grades.” He then traced the written evidence from the Tang through Ming times for dreams as auspicious signs of examination success.¹⁴⁸

At least five Ming emperors reputedly relied on dreams to choose the *optimus* in the palace examination. In 1385, the Hongwu emperor, whose own famous dream was recorded as an autobiographical account of his ascent to power, dreamed of nails (*ding*) and silk thread (*si*) and therefore chose Ding Xian as the *optimus*. The reasoning was that Ding's surname had the same sound as the character (*ding*) for nails, and the character for silk thread formed part of Xian's name.¹⁴⁹ In 1421, the Yongle emperor reportedly dreamt of a crane (*he*), a symbol for Daoist immortals, before the palace examination. On the basis of this omen, he selected Zeng Holing as the *optimus* because Zeng's name included the graph (*he*) for a crane.

Later in 1448, the Zhengtong emperor dreamed of meeting a literatus, a Daoist, and a Buddhist before the palace examination. He then chose the top three palace graduates on the basis of their intellectual backgrounds: the *optimus* Peng Shi (1416–1475) was registered from a hereditary literatus family (*ruji*); the second-place Chen Jian (1415–1471) had once been a student of music in a Daoist temple; and the third-place Yue Zheng (1418–1472) had served in a Buddhist temple. In 1544, the Jiajing emperor chose a candidate with the character “thunder” (*lei*) in his name because of a dream in which the emperor heard thunder. Qin Minglei (1518–1593; lit., “noise of thunder”) from Zhejiang province was the beneficiary of the dream.¹⁵⁰

It is impossible to verify accounts of imperial dreams. Many were imperial fabrications; others were imputed to the ruler; but even as fabrications, the dreams represented cultural accounts that drew on historical events and molded them to the morality tale being told. It was reported, for instance, that Yu Qian had appeared as a ghost before his banished wife and asked to borrow her eyes so that he could appear normal before the emperor and plead his case. In the morning, Yu's wife became blind, while Yu himself appeared before the emperor as an image in a fire that broke out in the imperial palace. Realizing the injustice done to Yu in 1457, the emperor pardoned his wife. It was a false dream, however, because the Chenghua emperor could not have pardoned her. She had passed away years before while in exile. He did rehabilitate the Yu name and allowed the son of Wang Wen (1393–1457), also martyred in 1457, to take the civil examinations in 1465. The dream symbolically righted the

wrong done Yu Qian and is useful to us as a lie about how things ideally should have appeared.¹⁵¹

Dream interpretation played a significant role in the lives of more than half of all Ming *optimi*.¹⁵² Dreams were interpreted as human “counterparts” (*xiang*) to the other world that could be diagrammed and analyzed to understand a person’s character and behavior and divine his fate. The *Illustrated Survey of Optimi during the Ming Dynasty* diagrammed and discussed the dreams of *optimi* from 1371 to 1571. It was initially compiled to retell the foreordained achievements of all Ming *optimi*. This semiofficial work, for which we have a later 1607 edition, was honored with a new preface by the late Ming Hanlin academician and imperial Grand Secretary Shen Yiguan (1531–1615), who gained for it an imprimatur as an acceptable biographical record of the dreams of great men then en vogue.¹⁵³

Such premonitory dreams of success were written about and illustrated in the uniquely Ming wood-block form of portraying dreams graphically as a “bubble” of consciousness that emanated from the mind while the body was asleep.¹⁵⁴ Astrological signs such as the Southern Dipper, auspicious omens such as dog meat, and unusual coincidences fed into the Ming belief that the mind at rest tended to weave a cultural matrix of visual images and symbols whose surface aspects could be studied for the manifest content they implied. I will interpret these dream-visions as historical constructions and not as actual dreams whose riddles need deciphering. It is likely that all were ad hoc constructions and not the manifest dreams they were presented as. Instead, I will make the Ming solutions to the riddle of the dreams the object of analysis to see how such dreams and their cultural interpretations functioned in the examination market.¹⁵⁵

For our purposes, the “manifest content” of dreams was channeled in part by the male anxiety that the examination life entailed. Although the “latent dream-thoughts” of *optimi* will never be transparent to us because they always were encoded, transposed, revised, and distorted in the cultural discourses peculiar to Ming China, we can begin to decode some external aspects of the interrelation between the psychological makeup of the men and families who claimed to have had such dreams and their sociohistorical experiences and pressures. Their repressions

and sublimations were far different from those we can intuit today because the cultural terms were defined by their times and not ours. Indeed, to call their mental streams of consciousness “bubbles,” “repressions,” or “sublimations” tells us more about ourselves than Ming literati, given the historical changes that have occurred in the conscious and unconscious internalization of human agency over time and from culture to culture.¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, through their graphically recorded “dream-visions,” we do get a vivid sense of what preyed on their minds as they lived through the grueling examination life in examination cells.¹⁵⁷ I will give two illustrated examples.

Three “Heads”

Figure 5.9 presents a late Ming wood-block illustration prepared for the *Illustrated Survey of Optimi during the Ming Dynasty* in which three heads appear in a 1445 “bubble.” The print represents a “daydream” that Shang Lu (1414–1486; see Chapter 2) reportedly had while a young man reading the classics in his family’s study, probably sometime before 1435. The published account of it indicates that his teacher, a man named “literatus Hong,” had been living with him in his room, helping him prepare for the examinations. The elegant setting of the study, his neat reading desk complete with the writing paraphernalia required of all calligraphers, and the fact that he had a live-in tutor all indicate that Shang’s Zhejiang family had substantial means to provide him the time and cultural resources needed for his classical studies. This was not a rags-to-riches story.¹⁵⁸

In the illustration, however, Shang Lu is not hard at work. Instead, he is asleep while his teacher is absent. A bubble of a man holding three heads laced together by their hair emanates from Shang’s head. The man presents the heads to Shang. The cultural overlap between “three heads” and “three firsts” are homologous in both Chinese and English. The Chinese term for “head” used in the dream is *shou* and not *tou*, the more physical image of the head attached to the body, although both were used to describe notions of coming in first, or being on top, or referring to the leader. Accordingly, it is not a gory scene, or one of immediate horror, but nonetheless three bodyless heads are presented as trophies to Shang to celebrate his triumph over many others. Shang Lu rests peacefully, so this is a wishful dream, not one driven by overt anxiety or punishment.



Figure 5.9. Three heads appear in a 1445 dream-vision. *Ming zhuangyuan tukao* [Illustrated survey of *optimi* during the Ming dynasty]. Compiled by Gu Dingchen and Gu Zuxun. 1607 edition.

Some sense of the sacrifice of the body is evoked by the powerful images of the three heads held in one hand by the mysterious man. Warriors in imperial China, not students, typically severed the heads of their enemies and presented them to their leader as a trophy to confirm victory in battle. Decapitation was a legal measure the Ming dynastic code enforced in capital cases, if the crime were determined to be a “heavy” one, as opposed to a “lighter” one entailing death by strangulation or slicing. Perhaps military and legal readings of Shang Lu’s dream have some very limited relevance in evoking the examination market, where to compete and win in the prohibitive competition meant that others had to fail. Lacking the detailed information that would tell us more about the dream’s latent characteristics, we are left with its placid, manifest content as depicted by late Ming compilers.¹⁵⁹

Upon awakening, Shang Lu immediately related the dream to his teacher, who instead of scolding Lu for falling asleep tells him that it is an “auspicious dream.” The “three heads” are a vision into the future of Shang’s life as a civil examination candidate. With hindsight, Shang’s preordained success was corroborated when, at the age of twenty-one, he passed the 1435 Zhejiang provincial examination ranked first, followed that up ten years later as the number one graduate on the metropolitan exam, and received the final of his “three heads” by being named *optimus* on the 1445 palace examination. Shang was to that time the only literatus who had achieved “three firsts” (*sanyuan*) on Ming civil examinations. As an examiner, Shang would see to it that another aspiring challenger, Wang Ao, would not duplicate the feat (see Chapter 2).

Shang Lu’s dream presents his success as a natural outcome of fate. The hard work and prodigious memory required to achieve such success are elided in favor of a smooth path to fame, fortune, and high political office.¹⁶⁰ Read more historically, however, the placid dream covers up what must have been the considerable worries Shang had when, after passing the 1435 provincial examination, he likely failed the 1436, 1439, and 1442 metropolitan examinations. Given that he was over twenty in 1435, Shang probably also had failed the highly competitive Zhejiang provincial examination a couple of times, in addition to the metropolitan examination perhaps three times. Like most, then, Shang had to wait

until his thirties before he received the coveted palace degree and entered the civil service.

This story of preordained success becomes more problematic when the failures are added to the record. We forget the childhood years of memorization (Shang specialized on the *Documents Classic*, for example) and the youthful days spent in the study reading widely and practicing examination essays. In fact, the metropolitan record of the 1445 examination indicates that Shang's 8-legged essays were not particularly outstanding. Not one of his three essays on the Four Books was picked as the best. Only one of his four essays on quotations from the *Documents* was selected. Shang made his mark by writing the best discourse and documentary papers on session two, and one of his policy essays on session three was also chosen as the best on that question. For the late Ming audience, the single bubble replaced years of hard work and disregarded the competition for honors Shang was fortunate to win.¹⁶¹

Buddhist Lotus Sitting

Our second example of a bubble dream illustrated by Huang Yingcheng for the *Illustrated Survey of Optimi* (see Figure 5.10) clearly shows the influence of Buddhism in the case of the 1553 *optimus* Chen Jin (1525–1566). In the dream, which floats above the roofs of three elegant buildings in a compound, Chen is sitting on a lotus flower in a meditating “lotus position” surrounded by three people. All are floating on a cloud in the sky, and the bubble takes precedence over the earthly world seen from above. The three personages floating on the cloud dropping from the sky are an immortal, a young man, and a woman. The three invited Chen to mount the lotus, and he obliged them. As they entered the clouds, Chen became afraid, but the immortal presented him with a gold cap and crimson official robe, both symbols that he would become the *optimus* and formally appear before the emperor.

Sitting like a Buddha in meditation but dressed in the garb of a literatus, Chen Jin appears at peace and in control, after overcoming the initial fears he felt. The illustration projects order and inevitability, which clashes with our historical portrayal of the examination market as a venue of furious competition, widespread corruption, and male anxiety.



Figure 5.10. Riding the lotus flower in 1553. *Ming zhuangyuan tukao* [Illustrated survey of *optimi* during the Ming dynasty]. Compiled by Gu Dingchen and Gu Zuxun. 1607 edition.

Sitting on a lotus in Buddhist-style meditation, Chen has floated to the other world and received its blessing for success in this world. Again, there is no reference to the years of hard work, memorization, and essay writing that any young boy from a family of means would have endured. Chen has won a therapeutic victory over his trials and tribulations in the examination market.¹⁶²

Responses to Failure

From the ordained success of the few *optimi*, we turn now to the public failure that was the lot of most young men who competed in the examination market. Failure was usually rationalized by internalizing the therapeutic regimes offered candidates and their families. Using religion and popular mantic techniques, such therapies, when accepted, kept male anxiety within acceptable social boundaries and prevented dreams and hallucinations from going beyond the acceptable standards of cultural health during the Ming and Qing. But this was an inherently unstable balance of outer public pressure and inner emotional resources that each individual and family had to navigate.

Changing Views of Fate Prediction

When reliance on mantic techniques failed, profound disillusionment often followed. Many assailed the pervasive uses of divination, geomancy, and dream interpretation in the examination market as misplaced. Similar sentiments were repeated inside examination halls. Many metropolitan and provincial examiners, who used the political precincts of the dynasty's "cultural prisons" to place "official" limits on the scope of elite belief in popular notions of fate and communication with the other world, challenged the reign of cults, gods, spirits, and the mantic techniques to communicate with them.¹⁶³

Since the Han, "anomalies" (*yi*) were featured in a variety of private and official writings seeking to domesticate the other world by placing its unusual impact on everyday life within "records of unusual events" (*zhiguai*). Following the fall of the Han in 220, anomaly records shifted from the "small writings" (*xiaoshuo*, i.e., "fiction") section in the canon of "masters" (*zibu*) to the section on "histories" (*shibu*). After the Tang,

when the civil examinations were expanded, the “records of anomalies” (*yiwen lu*) focused on the examination compounds and the mental life of candidates, which in effect became a subgenre in the taxonomy.¹⁶⁴

These accounts mounted in number and by Song times filled up encyclopedias, such as the *Expanded Records of the Taiping Era* (*Taiping guangji*), completed in 977, and in “note-form literature” (*biji*). In Northern Song anomaly accounts, literati such as Shen Gua (1031–1095) tended to revise the Tang categorization of natural anomalies by distancing themselves from records of ghosts and divine spirits. In his *Brush Talks from the Dream Book* (*Mengxi bitan*), Shen retained the Han-Tang style of fascination with marvels and anomalies, but he also sought to dispel the otherworldly aura of ghosts.¹⁶⁵

Northern Song literati-officials also remained agnostic about astral anomalies when they dispelled the outlandish cosmological claims of career bureaucrats in the Directorate of Astronomy between the 1006 sighting of a supernova and the 1066 discovery of a comet (Halley’s). Fan Zhongyan (989–1052) was very circumspect in viewing astral anomalies such as the supernova of 1006 or the meteor shower of 1038 as evidence of heaven’s interaction with human and political affairs. Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072) attacked then popular sky-reading traditions and separated politics from astral anomalies. The Song literati position, which Ming examiners tried to reproduce, stressed human agency in the political world. The classical position of distancing heaven from human affairs was preferred over the Han interpretation of anomalies as omens of political failure.¹⁶⁶

Ming examiners often invoked Ouyang Xiu’s cautious position on linking events on earth to the heavens and appealed back to a classical and Song ideal, which tolerated records of anomalous events but also sought to set limits to how seriously such speculations should be taken. By explicitly attacking the role of Han officials in manipulating omens and anomalies for political purposes, Ming examiners also tried to control the impact of the mantic arts by stressing instead “Way learning” notions of human responsibility and moral cultivation. The tension between an ideal cosmos, in which the natural and political worlds were acceptable though distant reflections of each other, and the popular mantic arts, which brought such theories dangerously down to earth in

the forms of religious and popular communication with the other world, were never successfully resolved in the late empire. Increasingly evident in the early Qing, literati dissatisfaction with the inroads made in examination life by popular religion and the mantic world of diviners, fortune-tellers, and Daoist priests was foreshadowed during the sixteenth century.

Resistance to the mantic arts in examination life increased during the Qing, especially among a small but critical mass of evidential scholars. Given the deluge of candidates taking the civil examinations after 1700, however, such resistance had little effect in practice. Dai Mingshi (1653–1713), a popular writer of classical essays who as an outside observer frequently criticized the official examination rankings, ridiculed the popular belief in the role of fate in the examination rankings. In his 1702 preface to his collection of the best examination essays from the provincial examinations that year, Dai pointedly attacked those who attributed their success or failure to fate, ghosts, or the mantic arts. In Dai's view, the hard work required to learn how to write proper 8-legged essays was the key to success or failure. In this regard, "individuals had to accept responsibility because ghosts had no role to play." Dai Mingshi restored to preeminence the years of childhood memorization and thousands of practice essays that had been elided in the rush to grant fate the final say.¹⁶⁷

In the eighteenth century, Wu Jingzi early on relied on geomancy in his quest for an examination degree, but as his failures mounted Wu ridiculed the practice in his novel *The Scholars*. His lineage had attributed their early Qing literary prominence to an auspicious grave site chosen by a geomancer. In the novel, Wu had a character say:

Nothing enrages me more than the way geomancers nowadays, who quote Guo [Pu, 276–324] as an authority, say: "This plot will ensure that your descendants come first in the palace examination and are Number One Palace Graduates." I ask you, sir: Since the rank of Number One Palace Graduate was instituted in the Tang dynasty, how could Guo Pu, who lived in the Jin dynasty [265–419], know of this Tang title and decree that a certain type of ground would produce this rank? This is absolutely ridiculous!¹⁶⁸

The Qing backlash against such religious avenues for fate prediction, however considerable, should not cloud our conclusions about their popular role in the examination market.

Nevertheless, the literati mastery, in theory, of the Four Books and Five Classics did not eliminate the inroads of popular religion or its mantic resources. Classical aloofness and literary satire could only curtail the public affirmation of popular religion and try to keep it in its secondary place. Even the Qianlong emperor was bedeviled by the mass hysteria in 1768 resulting from rumors that sorcerers were practicing magical arts and stealing souls by cutting off the queues worn by Han Chinese men. Their queues had symbolized submission to the Manchu dynasty since the fall of the Ming.¹⁶⁹

Dream interpretation remained an important feature of literati life in the Qing dynasty, but its historical significance, when compared with the late Ming elite craze for dreams, diminished and was transposed to general works on popular lore.¹⁷⁰ In the late Qing, the *Dianshi Pavilion's Pictorial* (*Dianshi zhai huabao*), a popular periodical, also presented accounts of preordained examination success, which included bubble illustrations of the dreams of successful Qing literati. For instance, we see a youth napping in his bookish study in an elegant garden. In his daydream, which takes place before the 1822 Shanxi provincial examination, the young man is received in the local Wenchang Temple, where he meets the patron deity of the literary arts. The meeting is later read as an omen of his future success as the *optimus* on the provincial examination.¹⁷¹

Such popular collections thrived and indicated that the distancing of heaven in the civil examination compound was resisted even when the candidate's examination essay correctly reproduced the required literati critique of fate and anomaly interpretation. The *Illustrated Survey of Optimi during the Ming Dynasty* was enlarged to include lists of Qing *optimi*, but such lists gave only the barest information of career success each *optimus* had attained. Not one mini-account mentioned any Qing *optimus* who had premonitions and dreams of his imminent success similar to Ming *optimi*. Nor were any bubble illustrations of dream visions included. Moreover, the brief accounts stopped in 1682, indicating that support for such an elite record of the role of mantic techniques and

dreams among the most heralded Qing literati empire-wide was not as acceptable for gentry publications as in the late Ming. A break in dream narratives about *optimi* had occurred after 1644. No subsequent publication attempted to paint dreams and the mantic arts as positively as had the Ming accounts.¹⁷²

Instead, the narratives of dreams continued in popular works of literature, such as those by Pu Songling,¹⁷³ in “records of anomalies” (*yiwen lu*) associated with the examination compounds, and in late-Qing periodicals. The collection *Recording Unusual Matters Heard in the Qing Examination Grounds* (*Guochao kechang yiwen lu*) in particular became a rich depository of civil examination lore up to the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), and it paralleled earlier collections of anomalies during the Song and Ming dynasties. Such popular elements were also incorporated in the examination compendia compiled by Liang Zhangju and by Li Tiaoyuan, both influential works. The late Ming passion for dream interpretation never really waned in the Qing, but its official portrait became more scholarly and aloof under the influence of more sober-minded elites, some increasingly oriented toward evidential research.¹⁷⁴

Pu Songling on Alienation

Pu Songling, a failure many times, immortalized the vast majority trapped in the relentless machinery of civil examinations in his many parodies. He called his most famous portrait of the candidate as a young man “The Seven Likenesses of a Candidate”:

A licentiate taking the provincial examination may be likened to seven things. When entering the examination hall, bare-footed and carrying a basket, he is like a beggar. At roll-call time, being shouted at by officials and abused by their subordinates, he is like a prisoner. When writing in his cell, with his head and feet sticking out of the booth, he is like a cold bee late in autumn. Upon leaving the examination hall, being in a daze and seeing a changed universe, he is like a sick bird out of a cage. When anticipating the results, he is on pins and needles; one moment he fantasizes success and magnificent mansions are instantly built; another moment he fears failure and his body is reduced to a corpse. At this point he is like a chimpanzee

in captivity. Finally the messengers come on galloping horses and confirm the absence of his name on the list of successful candidates. His complexion becomes ashen and his body stiffens like a poisoned fly no longer able to move. Disappointed and discouraged, he vilifies the examiners for their blindness and blames the unfairness of the system. Thereupon he collects all his books and papers from his desk and sets them on fire; unsatisfied, he tramples over the ashes; still unsatisfied, he throws the ashes into a filthy gutter. He is determined to abandon the world by going into the mountains, and he is resolved to drive away any person who dares speak to him about examination essays. With the passage of time, his anger subsides and his aspiration rises. Like a turtle dove just hatched, he rebuilds his nest and starts the process once again.¹⁷⁵

This account is fiction. Its realistic cultural content, however, lays out the psychological strain that candidates experienced in and outside examination compounds. Writing in the late Qing, Shang Yanliu noted that Pu's phrase "like a cold bee in late autumn" was accurate for northern Shandong, but in southern Guangzhou, where Shang took his provincial degree, it was more like "an ant in a hot pot."¹⁷⁶ Pu Songling's literary account of male anxiety circa 1700 reflects how his society and time perceived the examination experience as it ranged from youthful hope to adult disappointment and then to elderly maturity. Pu describes the toll examinations took on him and his fellow failures, who tried to cope with the pressure to succeed. Their narratives of examination failure stand in sharp relief against the reassuring woodblock prints of Ming *optimi* daydreaming about fate.

Pu Songling successfully turned his disappointments into a literary career. He did not seek to overthrow the examination regime, despite his sharp satire. Rather, Pu came to grips with his failures and coped by turning to literature. In the process, Pu achieved some therapeutic distance that must have been emotionally common in a landscape filled with so many examination failures and so few daydreaming *optimi*. Even *optimi*, however, had to fail several times before their predestined success was rationalized.¹⁷⁷

Pu's account of suffering is formulaic, even for successful graduates. His clinical depiction of the failure as an emotional wreck is not final, however. Rehabilitation, the return to mental peace of mind and the restoration of personal confidence, is the final lesson. Here Pu explains how and why the 99 percent who failed healed their wounds and in time returned to the examination cell to compete again and again, not much wiser perhaps but surely emotionally stronger, more mature, and experienced in the ways of the examination market and the difficult paths to fame and fortune in the late empire.

Pu Songling's realism is therapeutic in intent. Rebellion and iconoclasm are among the responses that examination failures often entertained, but most persevered and became part of the vast pool of residual manpower who repeatedly took examinations while they got on with their lives. In Pu's own case, this meant turning to writing stories as an alternative livelihood. Some could channel their frustrations by compiling examination editions for local printers or become local printers themselves, as did the Mas and Zous in the Sibao, Fujian, publishing industries. Others would crack under the pressure, as did the northern literatus Yan Yuan (1635-1704), when he failed to cope with his family crisis and with his continual failures on local examinations. Yan transformed his emotional crisis into a virulent attack on Cheng-Zhu teachings as bookish and the examinations as unmanly.¹⁷⁸ Pu Songling's therapeutic response, which falls far short of rebellion, was not unique. Not infrequently, failures would take that extra emotional step and strike out at the dynasty and its examination regime.¹⁷⁹

It was long taken for granted that local troublemakers frequently came from local licentiates who sought in vain to gain the coveted provincial and palace degrees. The Tang was overthrown by unreformed examination failures who turned to violence. Some of the leaders of the 1640s Northwest revolt, whose forces captured Peking in 1644 and brought down the dynasty in north China, were local examination candidates who had repeatedly failed to gain high office. Though famine, corruption, and war were the primary causes for the weaknesses of the Ming in its last decade, the willingness of some disgruntled examination candidates such as Li Zicheng (1605?-1645) to take up arms at a time of dynastic

crisis in the Northwest was predictable within an examination regime that could produce such high levels of emotional disappointment and anger among so many failures.¹⁸⁰

Hong Xiuquan's Countervisions

Men like Pu Songling were the rule during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Others, however, crossed the political and cultural boundaries of what their society and dynasty considered acceptable. The late Qing court vainly tried to keep the pool of local licentiates and candidates in political and legal line. The Qianlong emperor feared that plots against Manchu rule would emerge from the men who failed the civil examinations.¹⁸¹

Hong Xiuquan's (1813–1864) hallucinations and counter visions, which became the ideological foundations for the Taiping Rebellion, are a case in point. Many like the future Taiping Rebellion leader, who had a complete mental breakdown after repeatedly failing to pass local examinations in Guangzhou, were bereft of any hope of competing successfully for political office. Atypical in his use of Christian themes in the mid-nineteenth century to augment his views, Hong nevertheless appealed to long-standing religious forms of protest to contest the Qing dynasty's examination regime and its cultural legitimacy under Manchu rulers.¹⁸²

At the age of thirteen *sui* in 1827, under his registered name of Huoxiu, Hong traveled from his village in Guangdong province to take the qualifying examination in Hua county. Since the age of seven he had studied in his Hakka minority village school, and by all accounts he had been fond of learning for the five years he attended. His teacher and family thought his literary talent would enable Hong Xiuquan to gain high office and perhaps even to enter the Hanlin Academy. Hong passed the county qualifying examination on his first try. When he traveled to Guangzhou (Canton) prefecture to take the licensing examination, he failed. Hong first came into contact with a new world of trade, foreigners, and perhaps even Christian literature when he went for the prefectural examinations. Canton was the only port in Qing China legally open to foreign trade and contact.¹⁸³

To prepare for the next round of local examinations, Hong predictably became a village teacher, based on his success in the county examination. His teaching allowed him the leisure to continue preparing for the civil examinations. In 1836, at the age of twenty-four, already a bit old among the many younger candidates, Hong traveled a second time to Canton to take the prefectural examination. He failed. He also failed in 1837. After the third failure, Hong returned home seriously ill. In the midst of a delirium lasting four days (later Taiping accounts said he was ill for forty days to accord with Jesus's forty days of fasting), Hong had a fantastic dream but not the dream of an *optimus*.¹⁸⁴

Fearing his imminent death, Hong asked his parents' forgiveness for his examination failures. Visions overcame him. He first saw a dragon, a tiger, and a rooster. Then a group of men playing music approached in a beautiful sedan and carried him away. They reached a land of distinguished-looking men and women, who greeted Hong. An old woman took him to a river and while washing him admonished Hong not to defile himself again among the people below. Hong then entered a large hall, where an esteemed elderly man of the heavens asked Hong to venerate him because the man said he sustained all life. He presented Hong with a sword to overcome all demons and to protect his brothers and sisters, a seal to overcome evil spirits, and a sweet golden fruit. These represented imperial regalia, and Hong immediately began to admonish all around him to honor the venerable man who had presented him with these three marks of future power. Rather than that of an *optimus*, Hong's dream, like Zhu Yuanzhang's in the early Ming, was fit for an emperor.¹⁸⁵

Hong's fantastic visions of 1837 have been dissected as evidence of Hong Xiuquan's "madness" or of a religious conversion. In the former view, Hong was a victim of acute paranoia, "a form of psychosis in which there are delusions of grandeur, hallucinations, and feelings of untoward pride and hatred, all of which are logically systematized so that the individual actually believes his disordered perceptions." Following the latter view, scholars contend that Hong had been decisively influenced by Christianity in his visits to Guangzhou, and these experiences "served as a catalyst, transforming his disordered and frustrated mind through

the impact of the idea of salvation and the concept of a ‘Man-God.’” Alternatively, scholars in China have demystified Hong’s religious visions and rationalized them as premonitions of a new political order in China that would replace the imperial system.¹⁸⁶

The earlier discussion of the mantic arts and dreams in imperial Chinese lore reveals how inadequate such psychohistorical and sociohistorical accounts of Hong’s initial dreams are. When placed within the context of Chinese dream interpretation during the Ming and Qing dynasties, Hong’s visions are less evidence of an individual Han Chinese man’s paranoia than they are comprehensible narratives drawing on the rich symbolic traditions of Chinese religious and cultural life, which well-adjusted Ming *optimi* and Qing literati equally engaged in and which were deemed socially acceptable among upper elites. The cultural boundaries of mental health were drawn differently in late imperial China than in early modern Europe, and Hong Xiuquan’s delirium was an acute response to the examination pressures he faced and the high expectations his family and teacher had placed in him. Unlike most who coped, Hong cracked.

For the Taipings and for Hong himself, both of whom benefited from later hindsight, Hong Xiuquan’s strange “anomalous dream” was a sign of his special future and confirmed his fate as the anointed leader of the Taipings. To the rich repertoire of traditional Chinese religious and mantic symbolism, which included immortals, gods, demons, and fairies, Hong initially added Christian notions of a single old man in power in the heavens to the pluralist menagerie of Daoist and Buddhist powers in the other world that intervened in this world on behalf of young men who were trapped in “cultural prisons.” As therapeutic as this series of visions were (Hong recovered on his own without any successful medical treatment), they contained ominous elements that threatened to go beyond the usual limits of literati critiques and spoofs of the examiners and the civil examination system.

Rather than guarantees of examination success or even premonitions that Hong would become an *optimus*, as Ming dreams formulaically depicted, the old man above had presented Hong Xiuquan with imperial regalia and a call to purify the world below. The Hong lineage called in local doctors to treat the illness and also asked a mantic expert to inter-

pret Hong's visions and exorcise the demon possessing him, but we have no record of how the latter handled these disturbing aspects of the dream. We know only that Hong rebuked the exorcist. In Qing times, under Manchu rulers, the crime of *lesè-majesté* was just below the surface of Hong Xiuquan's dreams.¹⁸⁷

After recovering, Hong's life was relatively uneventful for several more years. It took a while for Hong to figure out what his dream meant. On the basis of this dream, however, Hong changed his name from Huoxiu to Hsiuquan, thinking, according to some scholars, that the two parts of the graph for *quan* symbolized the people's (*ren*) ruler (*wang*). By following the traditional art of character analysis and glyphomancy, Hong responded to his dream by renaming himself in accordance with it. In the spring of 1843, Hong tried again for the coveted status of local licentiate. To this point, his emotional recovery followed the outline of the changes Pu Songling described in the examination candidate who had rebuilt his nest and like a turtle dove started over. Hong had returned to the examination life.

When he failed a fourth time, however, Hong's reaction was rage, not delirium. He cursed the examiners while traveling on a boat returning from Guangzhou and composed a poem intimating a revolt against the Manchu dynasty. After arriving home, Hong's fury did not relent. Denouncing the dynasty and its officials, Hong threw his books out and apparently cried out: "Let me give examinations to select the literati of the empire." Hong's threat to become the examiner was realized when he radically revised the Qing examination curriculum to conform to Taiping ideology and Christian doctrine. In 1851, Hong ordered civil examinations under the Heavenly Kingdom to commence.¹⁸⁸

By rejecting the psychological mold of conventional literati protest, Hong Xiuquan was revolutionary, but the institutional forms his examination protest took were predictable. After 1843, Hong and his God Worshippers Society used the "anomalous dream" to demonstrate that Hong had ascended to heaven and met with God and Jesus Christ. Their instructions to him to purify the earth meant that the Manchus had to be removed, the Qing dynasty overturned, and the teachings of Confucius and Mencius eliminated. Hong had found his calling as the new emperor of Heavenly Kingdom of Eternal Peace (*Taiping tianguo*),

which would establish an examination regime for young men in the Yangzi delta environs of Nanjing based on Sino-Christian Taiping truth. Whether they admitted it or not, the late Qing reformers who after 1900 decanonized the official “Way learning” orthodoxy used in the civil examinations were following in Hong Xiuquan’s rebellious wake.¹⁸⁹

The popular, nonofficial dimensions of the civil examinations described in this chapter affected the lives of elites and commoners in remarkable ways. Nonofficial culture permeated the examination venues of the dynasty, while Hanlin examiners vainly struggled to keep the mantic arts out of the examination compound. Although such attempts failed, their efforts succeeded in setting limits to the scope of religion in the orthodox curriculum of the civil examinations until the eruption of Taiping religiosity in the 1850s.

In Part III, beginning with Chapter 6, we will examine how in light of the Qing dynasty’s increasing inability to control the society emerging around the Manchu state, civil examinations were retooled to adapt to the changing times of the eighteenth century. The climax of the Qianlong reign in particular drew new attention to the civil examinations, their cultural scope, and the content of the classical essays that were produced. Chapters 7 and 8 will address the new standards used to measure success and failure on the examinations before and after the Taiping Rebellion.

PART III

Retooling Civil Examinations
to Suit Changing Times

Limits of Dynastic Power

PART II OF THIS VOLUME has shown that imperial authority in Ming-Qing China was conveyed via classical literacy and cultural resources through the accredited cultural institutions of the Ministry of Rites, the Hanlin Academy, and civil examinations, which in turn transmitted the moral teachings of “Way learning.” The ruler often tried to transform his elites into a service class, but in the end a partnership was usually the result. Tang rulers proudly observed the grand sight of new palace graduates in procession after the rankings were posted. Tang Taizong (r. 627–650) exclaimed: “The world’s most outstanding men have entered within my range!” A powerful emperor who had seized the throne, Taizong exaggerated his preeminence over the medieval bureaucracy. The dynastic school curriculum still reflected literati values.¹

Moreover, examination halls empire-wide were supervised by literati officials, who were in charge of the military and police apparatus when so many men were brought together to be tested. Expenses required to maintain the civil examinations were very high and made it difficult for the court to increase the number of assigned personnel. Examiners in charge of the 1756 metropolitan examination, for example, described the number of officials and the budget required for a total of thirty-five days to convene the metropolitan examination. They listed eighty-six readers on the job for twenty-seven days and 706 copyists, most working for twenty-six days. The total cost of the operation was 4,089 taels of silver. Later that year, Chen Hongmou (1696–1771), then a court Grand Secretary,

described the need for enhanced funding given the increase to over 2,000 candidates for the metropolitan examination. In the 1763 metropolitan examination, Chen noted, 1,738 taels had sufficed, but for the 1766 examination, 2,204 taels of silver were needed, an increase of 27 percent, which the Qianlong emperor approved.²

The limits of dynastic power were also revealed through the examination regime. Resistance to imperial prerogative emerged among examiners, and widespread dissatisfaction and corruption among the candidates at times triumphed over the high-minded goals of the examiners. The examination hall became a contested site, where the political interests of the dynasty, the social interests of its elites, and the cultural ideals of “Way learning” were worked out more in practice than in theory. In the mid-eighteenth century, moreover, the Qianlong emperor recognized that retooling of the curriculum was necessary.

Examination Compounds as “Cultural Prisons”

Each testing site was a social and political microcosm of the late imperial cultural regime. Officials and candidates mastered the canon undergirding the cultural legitimacy of the Ming and Qing dynasties, but such reproduction was not always uniform. Many privately resisted on the outside what was publicly tested inside, but the machinery of examinations went on regardless. Literati first enunciated their public loyalty to the imperial system in local civil examinations. Such commitments to the teachings of the ancient sages and their Song interpreters implied that the classical curriculum was what literati stood for. The civil examinations measured each literatus suitable for public office by using standards that literati devised.

The anxiety felt by many Han Chinese as they entered the stream of candidates at testing sites was not resolved by the results of the competition because nearly all failed many times before proving their mettle as literati acceptable for office. Most never went beyond the licensing examinations in counties and prefectures. For most candidates, a local degree yielded enough of a tax break and legal privileges, which were interrupted briefly in the 1720s, to keep them contented. Residualism, that is, repeated failures, was more characteristic of the selection process than



Figure 6.1. The 1604 *optimus* drunk in an examination cell. *Ming zhuangyuan tukao* [Illustrated survey of *optimi* during the Ming dynasty]. Compiled by Gu Dingchen and Gu Zuxun. 1607 edition.

success. Famous failures became part of the lore of examinations. When the novelist Wu Jingzi (1701–1754) took the 1729 licensing examination, he offended the local examiner by appearing drunk (see Figure 6.1). His literary talents were recognized, but his moral character was suspect. Several failures later, he translated his experiences into literary spoofs of the examinations that he included in his widely read novel *The Scholars* (*Rulin waishi*). It represented an accepted literary form of public protest and entertainment in Ming and Qing times.³

Public Spectacle and Private Experience

Magistrates and prefects convened licensing and qualifying examinations in the heart of the town within their local yamen. Typical late Ming prefectural examinations attracted between 4,000 and 5,000 candidates. The prefectural yamen in Suzhou during a mid-eighteenth century local examination had two courtyards. Outside the west archway, shops sold examination supplies. The heavily guarded gates while the examination took place kept the crowd milling outside. Clerks stood in the outer courtyard with horns and gongs to beat when the examination commenced or ended. Two corridors bounded the inner courtyard, which normally served as offices for the six official yamen departments (paralleling the Six Ministries). Candidates used long tables in the halls for Rites, Revenue, and Personnel for the examination. At the back of the inner courtyard, a hall stood on a high platform. The chief examiner sat there after calling the roll, checking over the list of guarantors, issuing answer sheets, and preparing the questions. He was flanked by two rows of officials standing on both sides, all overlooking the candidates at the yamen tables. Each candidate was part of a mutual guarantee group of usually four students to prevent cheating, and all were monitored even when they went to the latrines inside.⁴

Since the Tang, the ceremonies of cultural prestige had been celebrated at the palace examination,⁵ but pomp and ceremony were noticeable at all levels, especially at Ming-Qing provincial sites. Once the special examination halls and their thousands of individual cubicles were swept and cleared of filth and rubbish that had accumulated, a festive market atmosphere prevailed outside the compound. Transformed every three years, the provincial compounds served simultaneously for cultural rituals, the deployment of police, and the testing of “Way learning.” Inside the halls there would be 5,000 to 10,000 candidates and a large retinue of examiners, clerks, printers, cooks, guards, and suppliers.

Besides the list of Ming provincial and metropolitan examiners, locals were assigned to sit in examination cells with the candidate, as shown in Figure 6.1. There were also clerks to copy the test papers, woodblock cutters to prepare the papers for the printers, cooks to feed the examin-

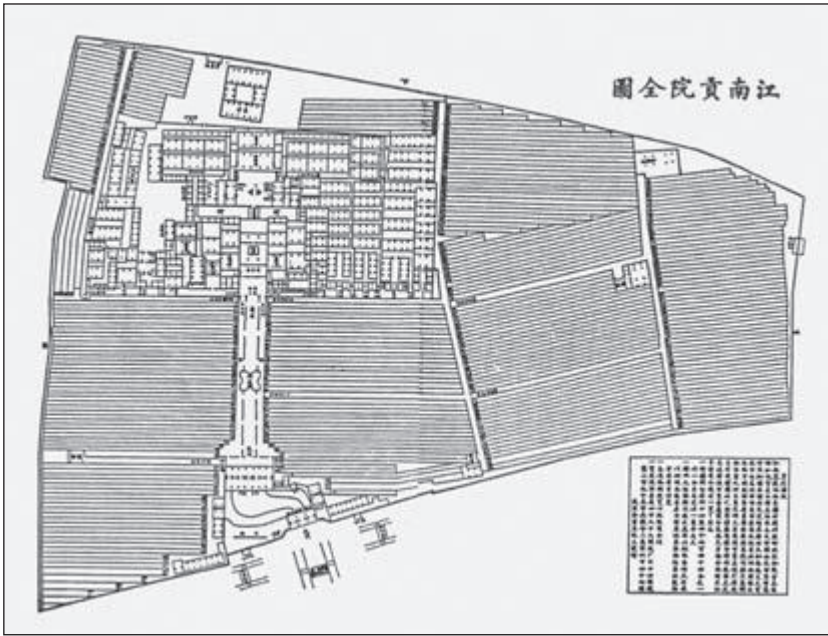


Figure 6.2. The Nanjing provincial examination hall. Etienne Zi, *Pratique des Examens Littéraires en Chine* [Practices of literary examinations in China] (Shanghai: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1894), foldout.

ers and their staffs, and suppliers to provide water for the candidates. The Nanjing examination hall, one of the largest in Ming and Qing times, could hold 7,500 candidates in 1630 (17,000 in 1850), and all told there were some 12,000 to 15,000 people housed inside during the three Ming sessions of examinations (see Figure 6.2). To keep pace with the expansion of candidates, the number of Ming overseers was increased, but the sum total of candidates continually outpaced the government's personnel.⁶

Candidates for triennial provincial degrees could enter the provincial compound the night before each of the sessions commenced. To ensure eligibility, licentiates, accompanied by their servants, usually appeared in the provincial capital a week in advance of the August-September (the eighth lunar month) date to present their county credentials, which guaranteed their identity and documented their immediate family lineage, their social status, and that they were not in mourning. Once approved

for admission, candidates had to prepare their own stock of writing paraphernalia, purchase blank writing paper stamped with an official seal, and take the necessary precautions for food provisions and toilet facilities while waiting for the provincial governor and examiners to enter the compound first.⁷ Shops catering to the candidates abounded outside the main gates of the examination compounds (see Figure 6.2), carrying store names such as “Examination Supplies for the *Optimus*” and “Famous Writing Brushes for Three Examinations.”⁸

Rice and gruel were provided for candidates inside the compound, but most preferred their own, which they cooked in a portable coal furnace. Friends and relatives presented small gifts of food as the candidates entered the gate. Next of kin stayed as close to the examination site as possible, heightening the fair-like atmosphere of commerce and activity.⁹ Candidates also provided their own candles to write at night, though the result was frequent fires. In 1438, for instance, a fire raged through the provincial examination hall in Shuntian, the capital prefecture. Another account claims that in the fall of 1463 over a thousand perished in a Shuntian hall fire, although other versions claim that the fire killed far fewer and that there was another fire when the examination was rescheduled the following spring.¹⁰

After entering the main gate in the south, the official overseers followed the main road north to their official yamens, where they and their staff remained in residence for the three weeks needed to complete the three sessions and grade and rank the papers. The inner overseers determined the questions (or the detailed text if the topics were set by the emperor) and took charge of supervising the grading and ranking process; outer overseers handled all administrative matters involving supplies and surveillance. Special rooms for sleeping, cooking, reading, and printing made up the central command post around which on the east, west, and south sides the myriad small rooms or cells for the candidates were arranged. As the number of candidates rose, the shape of the compounds sometimes changed from a rectangle (as in Shuntien prefecture; see Figure 6.3) to the misshapen triangle in Nanjing (see Figure 6.2). North remained the examiners’ preserve, however, and no cells could be placed there, although in Nanjing some cells began to appear on the northeast and northwest when some 15,000–17,000 candidates took the examination in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹¹

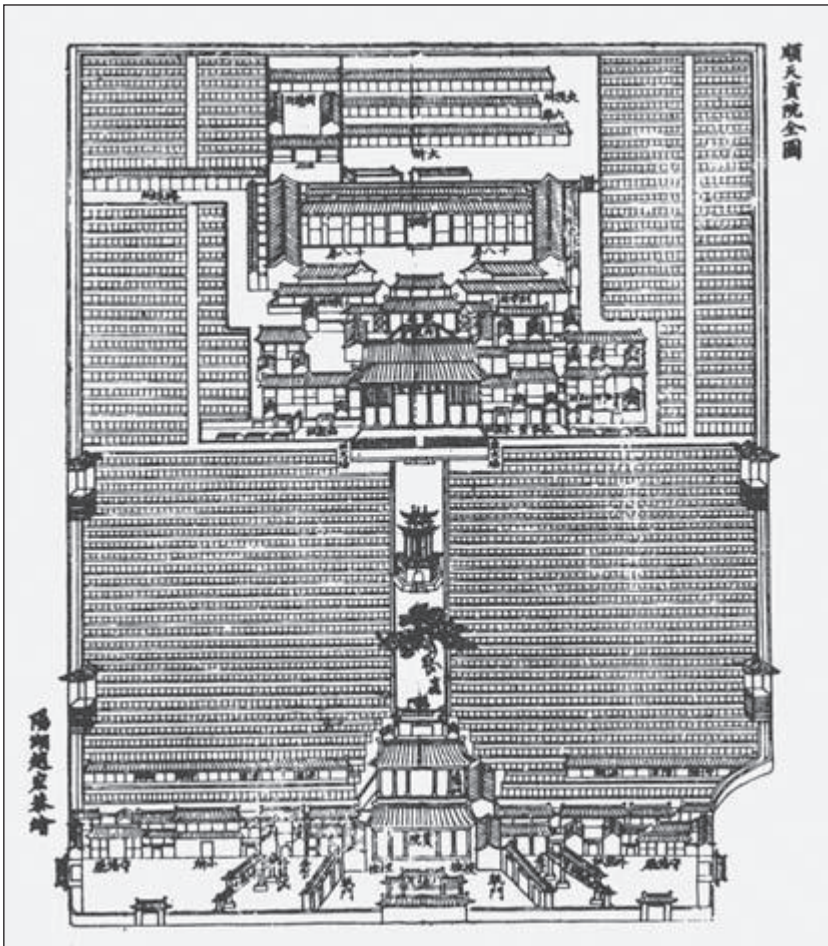


Figure 6.3. The Shuntian provincial and metropolitan examination hall. See *Shuntian fuzhi* [Shuntian prefectural gazetteer], 1885 edition.

The commercial bustle outside the examination hall contrasted with the stark atmosphere inside the double walls surrounding the grounds. The individually divided cells for the candidates radiated out east and west from the main south-to-north entry passage in a series of parallel rows that were separated by alleys no more than four feet wide (see Figures 6.4 and 6.5).¹² Large earthenware water jars were placed at the entrances to the rows of parallel cells (see Figure 6.5) for boiling and in case of fire. The end cells were usually close to the public latrines, where

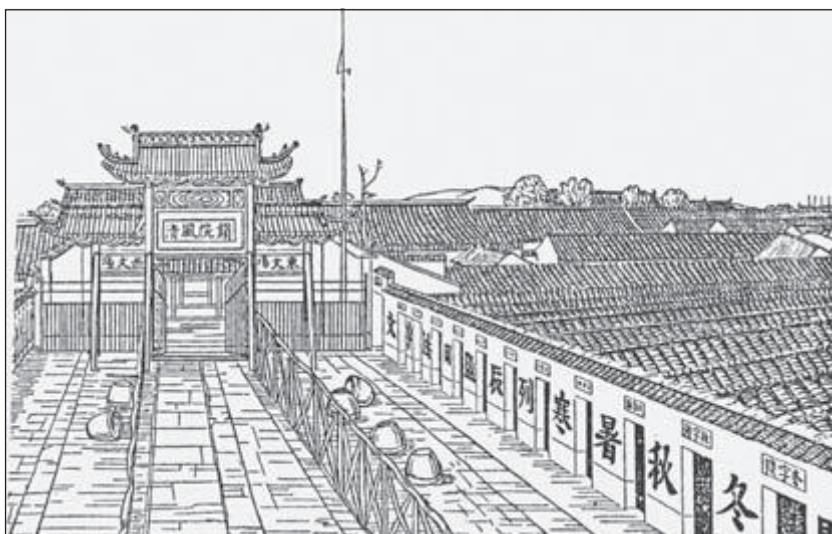


Figure 6.4. Main entrance to the Nanjing examination hall. Etienne Zi, *Pratique des Examens Littéraires en Chine* [Practices of literary examinations in China] (Shanghai: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1894), p. 104.



Figure 6.5. Corridors to the cells. Etienne Zi, *Pratique des Examens Littéraires en Chine* [Practices of literary examinations in China] (Shanghai: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1894), p. 106.

the stench was often unbearable. Candidates described such a location as one of the “six agonies” inside the compound.¹³

The entry to each cell was open from top to bottom for easier surveillance from a single pavilion raised high above ground level, but this meant that rain and sunlight could easily enter the cells. Stories of candidates’ papers destroyed by fire or blown away by the wind abound. A 1640 candidate, for example, dreamt that because fire had destroyed his examination papers they had to be rewritten.¹⁴ Candidates consequently had to bring a light oil-cloth screen with them to protect themselves, their toilet facilities, and their inkstone, brushes, and paper from rain, wind, and fire, in addition to having a padded quilt for sleeping in an exposed room. Such screens also helped against mosquito attacks in southern compounds.¹⁵

To prevent cheating, the examiners required provincial candidates to gather by prefecture at a prescribed hour outside the main gate, where they were searched by inspectors and clerks. The infamous rough body searches were a rude awakening to the vexing sanitary and surveillance conditions inside and were recorded by outraged literati ever since the Tang dynasty. Some candidates in each dynasty were so appalled by the dehumanizing conditions that they immediately left for home.¹⁶

Those who made it through were subject to strict surveillance inside as well. All provisions and clothing were frequently searched, and no printed or written material was allowed inside the compound. Those caught wearing inner gowns with the classics inscribed in small print on them (see Figure 2.2), for instance, were expelled and punished, usually by being banned from taking several cycles of the provincial examinations or by losing their licentiate status.¹⁷ Once past the initial checkpoints, candidates entered the examination hall and located their assigned alleys, which were classified according to the order of the characters in the *Thousand Character Text* (*Qianzi wen*), and then found the number of their cell in that alley (see Figure 6.5). Students from the same prefecture (or provinces, in the case of metropolitan examinations) were placed in the preestablished alleys assigned them. The search for a cell recapitulated the candidate’s youthful training in the classics, for all had begun as children to learn to read and write by memorizing the *Thousand Character Text* and *Three Character Classic* (*Sanzi jing*) primers.¹⁸

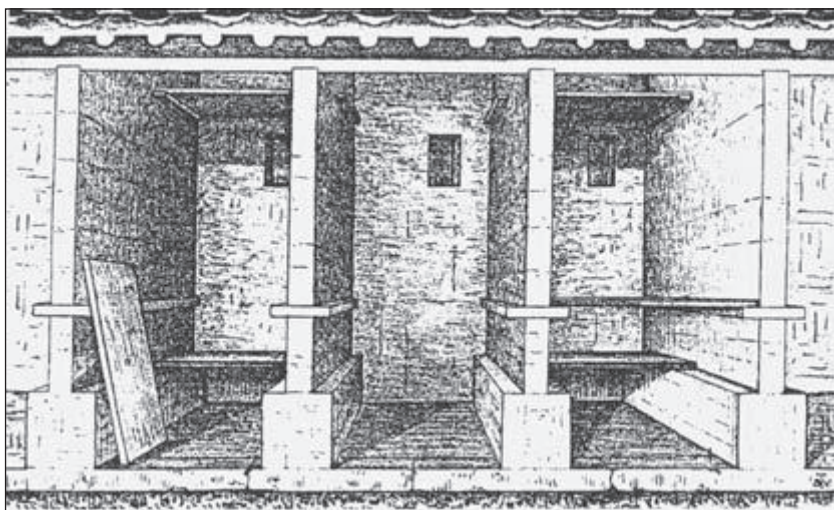


Figure 6.6. Open examination cells. Etienne Zi, *Pratique des Examens Litteraires en Chine* [Practices of literary examinations in China] (Shanghai: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1894), p. 141.

Once inside for a session, all candidates and overseers were cut off from the outside. No one was allowed in or out during the next two nights and three days. If a candidate died or became seriously ill in the compound, his body was passed by the guards through an opening in the walls.¹⁹ The cells contained two movable planks, which when placed in proper positions could serve as seat, desk, and bed (see Figure 6.6). When writing, candidates sat with their backs to the wall and faced north toward the open entrance to enable the guards to watch them (see Figure 6.1). Once the gates closed, they waited until the following morning for the calling of the roll, when it was ascertained that all candidates were in their assigned cells. The themes for each session were then given out as printed slips of paper and posted (*biao*).

For each of the three sessions, candidates had two full days to complete their essays. Normally, they prepared a draft of their answers in cursive or running script before recopying them in regular script. Many finished early, but some worked to the last minute, often requesting a candle to work if they had not brought one.²⁰ By dusk of the third day, papers were collected. The candidates were then ushered out of the compound by prefectural group (or by province in metropolitan exami-

nations). Between the second and third sessions, candidates were allowed a day and night of rest before reentering the compound to complete the other sessions.²¹

The candidates' examination papers composed using black ink, were stamped according to the assigned examination ward where they would be graded and were checked over for form, calligraphy, and possible violations (smudge marks, too many changes, use of banned characters, and so forth). The papers were passed on to some 200 to 300 copyists who copied all the papers in red ink and assigned a secret number to each of the copies to preserve the anonymity of all candidates.²² Another hundred or so proofreaders checked the copies with the originals to ensure accuracy and passed the red-ink versions to the appropriate associate examiners to begin the process of reading the anonymous papers. Ming examiners sometimes used green ink to mark the red papers for balance and form.²³

During the grading of provincial and metropolitan examinations, the papers were divided first according to which of the Five Classics a candidate had chosen for his specialization. Each Classic had at least one examination wardroom; the *Change*, *Documents*, and *Poetry* Classics had several wards where the papers for each were graded separately by the associate examiner assigned to that wardroom. Each of the specialization groups was certain to be represented among the top five names for the provincial and metropolitan examination.²⁴ Provincial examinations had a minimum of five wards, one for each Classic, while the metropolitan examination had up to twenty wards, depending on the specialization rates of candidates.²⁵

Teacher–student loyalties were especially strong in the Ming dynasty, when they became a matter of political concern. The Jiajing emperor (r. 1522–1566) decreed that students should not carry out any special rites of respect toward their ward head. During the Wanli era (1573–1626), teacher–student groups based on ward loyalties were prominent. Later, between 1658 and 1679 under the Qing, the ward as a unit of examination organization was abolished to prevent teacher–student cliques. Even though the ward was reintroduced in 1679, the Kangxi emperor still decreed that candidates should not carry out special rites of respect toward their ward head.²⁶ The scholar-official Qian Daxin (1728–1804) later criticized candidates who treated their examiners as patrons. Similarly, Qin Ying (1743–1821) linked so-called examination teachers to the increasing corruption among candidates in the nineteenth century.²⁷

Given the volume of paper that was produced and copied, it took the associate and chief examiners about twenty days to complete the final ranking list of graduates.²⁸ In the 1466 palace examination, for instance, the eventual *optimus* wrote a lengthy policy answer that required thirty rolls to complete. He had asked the examiners for extra paper to complete his answer. The story went that an elderly examiner could not rise from his kneeling position after reading all the rolls and required help to stand. Thereafter, a limit of thirteen rolls was set for the palace examination policy answer.²⁹

Limits were also established in Ming provincial and metropolitan examinations for essay lengths. Early Ming examination questions based on the Four Books required a short essay answer of at least 200 written graphs in length. A brief essay of at least 300 graphs elucidating the “meanings” (*jingyi*) of one of the Five Classics was the standard for classical studies. Despite the increasing number of examination readers, however, the pressure to read and grade within a prescribed period all papers inevitably meant that the questions administered during the first session received more attention from the examiners and thus the students as well. We have seen in Chapter 2 how the infamous 8-legged essays written on the *Four Books* and *Five Classics* became benchmarks for the civil examinations as a whole after 1475. In addition, the length of answers gradually increased until a typical 8-legged essay contained seven hundred graphs in the eighteenth century.³⁰ During the Qing dynasty, all of the red papers copied from provincial examinations were sent to the capital for the Ministry of Rites to review for irregularities.³¹

Candidates and their friends and relatives waited for the rankings to be posted outside the examination hall. A famous painting from the late Ming entitled “Looking at Examination Results” (“Guanbang tu”),³² by Qiou Ying (ca. 1490–1552), focused on anxious degree candidates going over the examination results. Hawkers would write down the names of successful candidates and sell them on the streets. Those few who passed the provincial examination were invited to the governor’s yamen for a celebration and decorated with an embroidered collar. Formal and informal festivities followed, and as word was passed from the province to the home prefecture, county, and department, the graduate made his way home with much fanfare (see Figure 6.7).³³ Such fanfare for provin-



Figure 6.7. The 1484 *optimus* paraded before friends. *Ming zhuangyuan tukao* [Illustrated survey of *optimi* during the Ming dynasty]. Compiled by Gu Dingchen and Gu Zuxun. 1607 edition.

cial graduates paled in comparison to the reception received by palace degree-holders in the capital and at home.

Beginning in 1388, the *optimus* was permitted to build a memorial arch at home. In 1404, inscribed stelae containing the names of all triennial palace graduates in ranked order were placed in the grounds of the Imperial School in Nanjing, a tradition that lasted from 1416 until 1904 in Beijing. Later, Ming provincial and palace degree-holders regularly erected memorial flagpoles or plaques in front of their homes or ancestral hall to mark their achievements.³⁴ The vast majority of candidates failed, however, and most failed several times in their quest for higher degrees. They were, however, allowed to see their papers and learn from the examiners' comments.³⁵

Political Architecture of Surveillance and Control

As a naturalized but sometimes contested form of selection, civil examinations marked the educational divide separating predominantly Han Chinese from their Manchu rulers. The examinations also divided Han elites from less advantaged commoners. Examinations generally elicited voluntary compliance, however. Those literati who passed demonstrated their mastery of the "Way learning" values. Examination halls were not prisons in the literal sense, a site where alleged criminals were held against their wills until their cases were decided or their sentences were executed. Formal prisons mandated compliance according to the provisions of the penal code. But neither Ming-Qing prisons nor jails were built on the scale of examination compounds, which indicates that the late imperial state, unlike its republican and communist successors, could achieve reasonable levels of social stability without penal colonies or gulags. Late imperial elites publicly complied with the requirements of continuous registration for examination and reexamination and personally acquiesced to the perpetual assessments and classifications that determined the winners and losers in the examination market.

When the examination halls are described as "cultural prisons," it means that in China civil and military candidates were voluntarily locked into policed compounds, which kept unauthorized people out, in contrast to a penal prison that involuntarily locked criminals in. The irony is that sons of elites competed with each other to enter the examination compounds while the sons of peasants and artisans could only dream of

gaining entry to the cells as candidates, although they might on occasion enter as agents of surveillance. Social acceptance of such political control tells us how different “cultural prisons” were from jails and why they could be glorified as “civilized” institutions.

On further reflection, we might conclude that examination cells had more in common with Buddhist monastic life than with actual penal colonies. Examination cells in the compound could just as easily be compared to monastic cave retreats and mountain pavilions where Buddhist monks often retired for meditation. Once locked into the examination compound, however, candidates, unlike monks, could not exit, and their behavior inside was policed by guards and clerks. Buddhist temple celebrations included large numbers of celibate monks and merit-making laypeople and also represented a symbolic order of daily life directly parallel to the public spectacles at civil examinations. During the Tang dynasty, for example, the civil examination graduation ritual known as the “ceremony of gratitude” mirrored ordination rites in Buddhist temples and relied on Buddhist vocabulary, gestures, and objects.³⁶

When not in use, the specially constructed examination compounds that dotted the landscape of provincial capitals and the imperial capital resembled ramshackle prisons without inmates. Repainted and restored according to the relentless pace of biennial and triennial examinations empire-wide, the compounds in effect became “cultural prisons” when each of the tens of thousands of cells in the provinces and capital housed a candidate for civil office.³⁷ The complex registration requirements, the regimented surveillance procedures, and perpetual reassessments orchestrated empire-wide mobilized millions of candidates and thousands of overseers within examination halls. From the outside looking in, the process signaled a coercive technology within which docile individuals at first sight were objectified into atomized candidates who willingly competed anonymously against each other. The identity of each was reduced to his anonymously written papers. The process inside the examination compound temporarily stripped candidates of their names, family, and social rank. Each was presumed to be unknown and thus equal in the eyes of the examiners.

Police surveillance inside Ming-Qing examination compounds has generally been overlooked, except by the candidates. Glorified accounts of the selection process have highlighted social mobility and selection of

talent or just assumed that the imperial surveillance system had been uniform since the Tang or Song dynasty. However, the Qing scholar-official Zhao Yi (1727–1814) noted in his historical studies that surveillance procedures in Tang and Song dynasty examination compounds were lax when compared with the strict policing in Ming and Qing examination halls. The operation of examinations, as opposed to their idealized history, shows the dynasty busily policing virtue and education in such artificially created examination halls.³⁸

Civil examinations were an exercise in cultural and educational strength unmatched in coercive magnitude by any other educational institution. The spatial nesting of hierarchies of civilian and military surveillance, the machinery of control whereby candidates were enclosed, grouped, and separated into cells according to a predetermined economy of time depending on the level of the examination, and the careful observance of protocol and behavior when taken together suggest that the “prison” metaphor is not beside the point.³⁹ Only death and taxes, and perhaps legal cases, affected more people during the late empire.

Late Ming Calls for Examination Reform

Tang, Song, and Ming literati often decried the failure of the examination system to accomplish its stated goal—to select talented literati for public office. The most frequently heard refrain, first enunciated by the Tang literatus Zhao Kuang (fl. ca. 770), was that candidates for office “study things they will never use and later use what they have never studied.”⁴⁰ But reform was generally inconceivable unless the reformers took into account how reforms would deliver a better civil service. From the very beginning to the very end, reformers presented schools as a viable alternative to civil examinations to select men for official positions.⁴¹

Even those who praised the selection system saw much room for improvement. Qiu Jun and Wang Ao (see Chapter 2) each affirmed examinations and the “Way learning” curriculum, but they also thought that the classical specialization policy was adversely affecting classical studies. Both also thought that the policy questions should receive more attention. Wang Ao, ironically because his examination essays became

models for 8-legged essays, felt that too much emphasis had been placed on the classical essay, which satisfied examiner requirements but demonstrated little learning.⁴² Policy debates concerning civil examinations reached a startling level of seriousness in the late Ming when, just before the fall of the dynasty, a number of literati called for the abrogation of the entire apparatus.

Calls for Abrogation

Those associated with the Restoration Society in the Yangzi delta actively debated a proposal sent to the throne in 1636 by Chen Qixin, a military examination official from Huai'an, who called for a simple recommendation procedure to select officials. About the same time, the governor of Henan memorialized suggesting a gradual scaling down of the civil examinations and their replacement by a process of guaranteed recommendation similar to that of the Song dynasty.⁴³ Chen and the governor appealed to the precedent of the Ming founder, who temporarily stopped civil examinations in 1373 (see Chapter 1). If the recommendation procedure did not produce more men of talent, then the examinations could be reinstituted.⁴⁴

Chen Qixin was not willing to consider a gradual solution. He outlined three major "illnesses":

1. Using literary examinations to select men as officials was fundamentally flawed. Such tests produced men whose morality and learning was little more than "empty talk on paper."
2. Relying too rigidly on palace degree qualifications to appoint officials excluded many men of talent. The early Ming had been well served by numerous lower degree-holders, but after the Jiajing reign (1522–1566), the important offices were given to higher degree-holders (see Chapter 3).
3. Given the domination of almost all high-level posts by palace graduates, overlapping county and judicial officials were superfluous. Chen called for immediate elimination of civil examinations, promotion of all moral candidates regardless of degree status, and elimination of the post of local judicial officials.⁴⁵

The Chongzhen emperor (r. 1628–1644) considered the proposals, but they provoked a vigorous rejoinder from high civil officials, all palace graduates. They attacked Chen as an inexperienced military official who was jealous of the civil service. While admitting that not everyone selected via literary examinations was worthy, the censor quickly listed outstanding literati since the Song, who had demonstrated their talents through the selection process. As the coup de grâce for their rebuttal, court officials also accused Chen of harboring antiliterati sentiments, which they compared to the infamous policy of “burning books and burying alive literati” during the Legalist Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE). If the emperor were to use such proposals, they concluded, “it would be admitting that Confucius and Mencius were not worth emulating.” This raised the stakes of the debate to a feverish level.⁴⁶

Chen Qixin could do little given the level of rhetoric his proposal elicited. He was lucky that he was not singled out for prosecution. The episode demonstrated, however, the ideological obstacles that reformers of the civil examinations would have to face, which in Chapter 8 we will see repeated when the Manchus also entertained needed civil examination reforms in the 1660s. Lurking within the late Ming court’s defense of civil examinations was an unspoken effort to keep low officials like Chen Qixin, who were not palace graduates, from widening the path to wealth and status for others.⁴⁷ Later leaders of the massive peasant rebellions in the Northwest that brought the Ming to its knees in 1644 were local candidates who repeatedly failed late Ming civil examinations. Debate over a military official’s proposal also suggests that later eighteenth-century policy changes, which permitted more fluid movement between civil and military candidates in local examinations, were a response to civil-military conflicts already evident in the late Ming.⁴⁸

Calls for Reform

At the end of the Ming, Huang Chunyao (1605–1645), after many failures long the way, finally passed the last Ming palace examination in 1643. He expected but never received an official appointment. Because of his experience, he regarded the civil examinations as a waste of men of talent like him.⁴⁹ Rather than memorialize the emperor, Huang chose in-

stead to address the literati community in a series of essays entitled “On the Civil Examinations” (“Keju lun”). Despite his heroic suicide upon the fall of Jiading to Manchu-led forces in 1645, Huang’s assessment became the starting point for early Qing efforts to address deficiencies in the use of written examinations to test candidates for office.⁵⁰

In his preface, Huang concluded that the recommendation system used during the Han was the best alternative when compared with the worthless written examinations based on belles lettres during the Tang. Huang noted that Song literati had tried to correct the literary focus in Tang examinations. Early Ming emperors had similarly stressed the “meanings and principles” (*yili*) of Song “Way learning” for the examination curriculum. In addition, there had been several avenues for promotion outside the examination process. But after 1465 only the civil examinations provided a sure path to “wealth and status” via 8-legged essays espousing “Way learning” views of the Four Books and Five Classics.⁵¹

Searching for middle ground between abolishing the civil examinations and preserving them, Huang Chunyao thought the examinations could still serve their purpose, if they were reformed. To this end, Huang proposed three major changes: (1) replacing the literary focus of examination essays with a concern for more substantial learning; (2) reinstituting the recommendation system; and (3) reforming imperial schooling so that local schools were more than just testing venues.⁵² Huang also proposed that the number of 8-legged essays be reduced in favor of the historical, legal, and policy questions given on session three, which deserved higher priority.⁵³

In concluding remarks, Huang emphasized that if the civil examinations were not reformed, “What the court would get in return were “strange literati” who were not “balanced” emotionally. This suggested the high psychological cost the examination regime had imposed on young men (see Chapter 5). Huang wrote: “If a classical essay can trouble a balanced person, how much more so a strange one.” Men who “study things they will never use and later use what they have never studied” (citing Zhao Kuang from the Tang) seemed to him to be the only result of the civil examinations.⁵⁴ Neither Huang, who perished in

the Jiading massacre of 1645, nor the Ming dynasty survived long enough for such proposals to be implemented. The interim rebel leader Li Zicheng (1605?–1645), when he captured Beijing in 1644, still held provincial examinations on the Ming model. As it turned out, the failed candidate-turned-reactionary had just wanted to pass the examinations, not to change them.⁵⁵

Late Ming literati such as Ai Nanying and Gu Yanwu also delineated the police-like rigors of the civil examinations for a literati audience. Ai described in vivid detail the horrors that licentiates faced in local examinations.⁵⁶ Gu, in addition to his biting criticism of Ming examination essays, traced the police-like atmosphere of the examination compound to the Tang dynasty. The result, Gu thought, was a surveillance and control system for the examination process that was replete with minute details concerning punishments for irregularities but which had lost sight of its goal of searching for talent.⁵⁷

Others, such as Huang Zongxi, also protested the excesses of surveillance in the examination compound, but Huang did not overtly challenge imperial control of the selection process.⁵⁸ Centralized surveillance linked the power of the emperor through the bureaucracy and his Hanlin Academy examiners to the lowest levels in Chinese society. As anonymous participants of this mechanism, sons of elites in effect became the bearers of the power relations undergirding the late empire, which allowed a few of them to enter its political precincts as officials. The Donglin Academy and Restoration Society successes in using the examinations to promote their interests (see Chapter 2), although short-term, were noteworthy because groups of literati had successfully targeted the selection process to advance their political fortunes as a defined group. Overall, however, the literati partnership with the throne was premised on the illegality of gentry factions in government. The Donglin debacle confirmed this.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, many of the examination reforms enunciated in the late Ming were proposed in the early Qing. After Qing armies conquered Beijing, civil examinations were held in 1645–1646 and then on a regular basis thereafter. Between 1663 and 1787, in particular, the Manchu court threw its weight behind efforts to modify the civil examinations along the lines outlined by late Ming critics.

Qing Efforts to Control Local Candidates, 1650–1850

The Manchu throne was perennially uncertain how to control the recruitment of lower candidates who took entry examinations in local counties, departments, and prefectures. Local examinations were the furthest away from the direct control of the court. With the decisive decline in the status of education officials in the late Ming (see Chapter 2), only provincial education commissioners, prefects, and magistrates were reliable monitors. The overall chronology of Manchu policy toward local candidates highlights how much resistance there was to Qing control. The court also realized that its policies were under constant assault.⁶⁰

Illiteracy and Local Military Examination Candidates

Since 1652 Qing emperors had decreed that local candidates should be registered in groups of five and that the five should check in for examinations as a group. The government would not only hold the candidate, his family, and recommenders responsible for his actions inside the yamen compound, but groups of candidates would also serve as mutually responsible units to monitor each other's behavior. This borrowed a page from the local responsibility units (*lijia*; see Chapter 3) created during the Ming to collect taxes and supervise local corvée labor.⁶¹ In addition, those who were classically illiterate could not enter official schools. Those who presented false registration papers or bribed education officials would be prosecuted.⁶²

In 1700, the Kangxi court decreed that all cases of illiterate candidates should be sent to the education commissioner for review. Classically illiterate commoners could bribe local education officials to allow them into the yamen compounds. In the early eighteenth century, the Qing court no longer trusted the magistrate's selection of eligible candidates to become licentiates. This problem remained unresolved in 1723, when the Yongzheng emperor ordered the prefecture and education commissioner to reevaluate local examination papers. The court commanded in 1725 that when candidates were reexamined for the licensing and qualifying examinations, they must also write from memory a section of the *Amplified Instructions for the Sacred Edict* (*Shengyu guangxun*), a practice in place since the Kangxi era.⁶³

After 1731, a new problem bedeviled the court. Although local magistrates and prefects were civil officials, they were also responsible for supervising local licensing and qualifying examinations for the military bureaucracy. Provincial education commissioners, magistrates, and prefects thus had to master the Chinese Military Classics, which were required texts on the military examinations.⁶⁴ Classical literacy levels of local candidates for civil and military degrees, interestingly, were becoming roughly the same, and candidates were legally permitted since 1713–1714 to cross over and take either examination for licentiate status.⁶⁵ This privilege was revoked in 1741. In 1744 the Qianlong emperor required local education officials to gather civil and military licentiates together each month to recite the expanded version of the Sacred Edict. In some cases, civil candidates were permitted to take military versions of the provincial and metropolitan examinations for the provincial and palace degrees.⁶⁶

Permitting licentiates to cross over and take either local examination made the process of checking the social identity and classical literacy of candidates doubly difficult. Already in 1723, the court complained that some “civil and military licentiates are premeditated murderers” and ordered their crimes punished. Yongzheng also withdrew all legal privileges previously granted local licentiates. In 1727, the Yongzheng emperor forbade military students from taking civil examinations.⁶⁷ The language of the court showed how far local degree candidates were from the ideal. Local “gentry bullies” were singled out as a type to prohibit from taking the licensing examination. In 1735, the court commanded that all education officials supervise local civil and military candidates more carefully. The Qianlong emperor expanded this policy to require the provincial education commissioner to report on each candidate’s behavior. Those who committed transgressions would be dismissed. Undesirables were gaining access to the civil and military selection process.⁶⁸ In 1820, the sons and grandsons of yamen clerks could no longer stand for civil appointment. Instead they could take local military examinations. The narrowing of statuses among literati elites, commoner clerks, and military families was difficult to prevent when each group was to some degree classically literate.⁶⁹

The long-standing civilian ideal was generally accepted by Han Chinese, but this goal was complicated by the Manchu conquering

elite, whose warrior banners had eliminated the Ming dynasty and placed the Han military directly under its command. Even though Han bannermen examinations were held as early as 1629, bannermen initially were not allowed to take the civil examinations so that they could maintain their martial traditions.⁷⁰ After 1652, bannermen could compete in regular civil examinations, although following 1665 they could also opt to take special translation examinations.⁷¹ Nonetheless, most bannermen remained military men, and the levels of corruption in the bannermen translation examinations in the capital, where the Manchu, Mongol, and Han banners were entrenched, were considerable.⁷² In addition, no Manchu or Mongol bannerman was ever ranked high enough by Han Chinese examiners to finish among the top three finishers on the metropolitan or palace examination until the last examination in 1904.⁷³

Qianlong Reforms and Spread of Corruption

To alleviate the pressure on local officials, the Qianlong emperor in 1743–1744 considered eliminating local quotas in prefectural examinations. Selection was to be based solely on the quality of candidates' papers. The rationale for this change referred back to a 1700 precedent for removing quotas. Instead, it was recommended that for each place in the prefectural school, officials would select fifty candidates from civil and twenty from military examinations. Fearing the practical effects of removing quotas, the court simply stressed that classically illiterate papers must not be selected.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, fraud on the examinations remained obvious, and the court's litany of transgressions continued. Candidates were handing in papers using false names; clerks were collecting duplicate papers, sometimes three to five times more than the number of candidates. The education commissioners were not reporting flagrant cases to the governor for action. In 1764 and 1766 local examinations, the registration forms often indicated that the candidate was a youth and yet the person taking the examination was sometimes forty or fifty years old. The court exhorted education officials to compare the forms of those entering and to scrutinize the appearance of candidates more carefully.⁷⁵

To streamline the process, the court in 1758 allowed some local examinations to be consolidated in addition to permitting the periodic

practice of combining licensing, renewal, and qualifying examinations. In cases where two counties were in the same city, they could hold the licensing and qualifying examinations together. This new procedure meant that the education commissioner and his staff of clerks and advisers could supervise examinations in two counties at once.⁷⁶ Such streamlining had consequences, however. Beginning in 1767, officials advising the Qianlong emperor were concerned that the examiners were tampering with examination papers in collusion with candidates. To remedy this, the emperor forbade local education officials from reading local examination papers, a procedure the Yongzheng emperor had reinstituted. Nor should they invite private academy heads to read examination papers in the yamen. By 1792, reports came in noting that the grading of local county and prefectural examination papers was beset with problems. Everywhere the members of an official's staff were becoming *de facto* examiners and evaluating papers for the magistrate and prefect. Illiterate papers were routinely accepted.⁷⁷

As the population rose to 350 million by 1800, there was an inordinate increase in local candidates, leading to even more irregularities.⁷⁸ One legitimate loophole that had existed since Ming times was partially closed in 1807. In the Ming, sons of officials had been granted the privilege of taking local and provincial examinations in the capital region if their fathers were serving away from their home province. By the late Ming, southern families whose sons faced stiffer odds passing civil examinations in the Yangzi delta and southeast coast frequently followed this avenue. After 1807, those registering in the Shuntian capital prefecture for local examinations were expected to have resided there for an appropriate time (usually twenty years) before they could register.⁷⁹

Petty details took on a life of their own. Procedures to monitor the registration of degree candidates also lead to false charges, as in the 1819 case in which a man accused his elder cousins of dual registration and then purchasing a degree in a locality other than where they had been born.⁸⁰ After 1820, the Daoguang court (r. 1821–1850) sought to enforce the rules without taking any major new initiatives. A notice that those who tampered with or rearranged the official ranking list would be punished suggested that after the papers had been graded, the rankings were

sometimes ignored. In 1824 the court stipulated that candidates taking the licensing reexamination would not be permitted to extend their time using candles.⁸¹

In 1827, the court appealed to local officials not to engage in immoral behavior such as adultery. The same year, an imperial edict allowed sons and grandsons of yamen clerks to take the military examinations, a request that was also granted in 1820. In addition, for the first time yamen clerks were permitted to purchase lower degrees. Although the door to local degrees was widening to include clerks, the court in 1829 made it clear that anyone legally indicted could not take civil or military licensing examinations. In addition, merchant influence in Canton examinations resulting from illicit profits made in the opium trade became a new source of worry in the 1830s.⁸²

Controlling Local Licentiates, 1650–1850

If monitoring some two to three million local candidates empire-wide for biennial licensing examinations was an increasingly futile effort by 1850, the Qing court's attempts to supervise and control its half-million already licensed degree-holders was doubly difficult. In 1651, the court consciously tried to use the levers of promotion and demotion to keep lower degree-holders in line. Local officials were ordered to abrogate licentiate status for those committing crimes, whose examination papers at the renewal examinations were to be summarily dismissed.⁸³ Furthermore, the Shunzhi emperor, fearing resurgence of late Ming-style political dissent among degree-holders, forbade in 1651 any further establishment of academies to prevent factions from recurring. This fear continued into the early years of the Kangxi reign. The emperor noted in 1662 that local licentiates should be concerned with their training to become a literatus and never be involved in forming factional alliances.⁸⁴

The Yongzheng Reforms and the 1733 Boycott

Under Yongzheng, the court changed its policy toward licentiates beginning in 1723. The emperor ordered educational commissioners evaluating examination papers of licentiates to note both their literary and moral

qualities. In 1726, the Yongzheng emperor appealed to licentiate to recognize that they were the pinnacle of the “four classes” (*simin*) and should set an example, rather than betraying the sages’ teachings. If literati were immoral, then “how could one expect the customs of the people to be correct?”⁸⁵ Accompanying this moral suasion, the court revealed that it would reward examination success with political status but also punish those who were not acting properly by removing their official status and abrogating their legal privileges.

The language of criticism that the Yongzheng emperor addressed to licentiate in 1726 contrasted sharply with his high-minded moral appeals. He contended that literati were now setting a bad example and bullying the people, thus ruining public morals. The emperor’s efforts to revive the official status of lowly education officials (see Chapter 3) by appointing provincial graduates and low-ranking palace degree-holders to such posts should be seen in light of the court’s efforts to find new ways to control the wayward tendencies of hundreds of thousands of licentiate who failed to move up the “ladder of success.”⁸⁶

What troubled the court was that examination officials did not pay enough attention to public morals. One way to improve public morals, the Yongzheng emperor contended, was to charge the provincial governor and education commissioner with monitoring each other’s activities in educational activities. In addition, the court reverted to the Ming pattern of appointing provincial education commissioners from the Hanlin Academy. In the early Qing, most commissioners were selected by the ministries or by the censorate. As early as 1684, some Hanlin academicians from within the court were appointed as education commissioners. The Yongzheng emperor used this precedent to track his influence down to local levels. By appointing men from the Hanlin, the Yongzheng emperor used them as provincial education commissioners to carry out the reforms needed to control local licentiate.⁸⁷

The emperor also initiated a new, special examination for licentiate recommended by the educational commissioner for their moral behavior. After each commissioner completed his three-year term in the province, he could recommend several candidates. The emperor would then test these candidates in the capital. This policy represented a return to

the Han dynasty precedent for recommendation of outstanding local talents, which was now meant to complement the examination and reexamination of local candidates.⁸⁸

In 1727, the emperor prepared an edict stressing the social mobility myth that was at the heart of the civil selection process. Citing the *Documents Classic*, he noted that the dynasty's search for talent had successfully reached the lowest levels of society and brought order to all the regions. Yet the number of candidates recommended for their moral qualities remained low. The emperor wondered out loud: "How is it possible that from among the hundreds of licentiates and tribute students in local schools . . . no candidates of high moral quality are recommended?" The emperor stressed that he preferred practical men over those with only literary talent. He reiterated that the same moral standards should hold for the Manchu, Mongol, and Han bannermen recommended for office.⁸⁹

From 1728 until 1730, the Yongzheng court kept up the pressure to improve the moral character of its degree-holders. In 1729, the court complained that education officials continued to value literary talent over moral qualities. Those inferior in virtue were not punished, and those superior were not rewarded. To drive its point home, the Yongzheng court drew on the 1652 precedent for registering local candidates in groups of five who would be monitored together to evaluate their moral qualities and behavior and held responsible for the transgressions of any one of them. Local records were to note any immoral behavior among these groups. Those deficient would lose their status and privileges. In 1730, the emperor complained that although the provinces had finally started to recommend men of moral character for entry into the Imperial School, the recommendations still did not document any actual deeds that merited such recommendations. Morality was not an easy fix.⁹⁰

The Yongzheng era of reformism closed with a local examination boycott that highlighted the tensions between local licentiates and the court's reformers. In 1733, licentiates throughout Kaifeng prefecture in Henan province boycotted the renewal and qualifying examinations in their counties because the new education commissioner was overly strict

in checking to see that there was no absenteeism or examination skipping in the prefecture. By 1700, most local examiners gave up trying to track every licentiate who was supposed to appear at the biennial renewal or triennial qualifying examination. The boycott represented the only public means by which licentiates could protest the unrelenting examination regime and the Yongzheng reforms. They refused to enter the compound.⁹¹

The court commented on the case in 1734 by noting that local problems had reached such a sorry state that licentiates now dared to boycott examinations to protest the government's efforts to control their behavior. Such public actions betrayed the dynasty's largess toward literati, the emperor wrote in an edict. Candidates should have voiced their protests to the appropriate officials and not have boycotted the examinations. Those who boycotted civil examinations were not permitted to take future examinations. Moreover, if groups boycotted future examinations, the examinations there would be stopped altogether. Education officials who incited candidates to such acts would be dismissed from their posts.⁹²

Qianlong-Era Top-Down Reformism

The Qianlong reign continued the reformist zeal to control licentiates and candidates and prevent riots. In 1736, education commissioners were asked to report on each candidate's behavior at the renewal examination for civil and military licentiates. In 1739, cases of illegal behavior by local students in the capital region and in the provinces were again brought to the court's attention. The emperor wrote that many literati no longer were models for the people to emulate. Local officials were again exhorted to be more vigilant in handling such cases. In addition, a new policy advocated in 1741 by the "Way learning" moralist Chen Hongmou (1696–1771), a rising provincial official, required all provincial and capital candidates to provide written proof that they had no unburied corpses of relatives at home or in temporary burial places. Although Qianlong often invoked ritual impropriety as a sign of the decline in public morality, Chen's recommended statute was rejected on the basis that it went too far. Court officials deemed it unenforceable and likely to become the pretext

for baseless charges against legitimate candidates and to lead to even more examination riots. Behind the overreaching ghoulishness lay a concern that the values of filial piety were being set aside in favor of personal ambition.⁹³

The Qianlong court initiated a major reassessment of the civil examinations in the 1740s. Irregularities and crimes in the provincial examination halls and local yamens had reached a level that they threatened the viability of the selection process. In 1741, for instance, an examination scandal surfaced in Shanxi province in which the Manchu education commissioner allegedly had been selling both civil and military licentiate degrees. After an investigation by the Manchu governor, the education commissioner was sacked. Two prefects were implicated and dismissed, but to show its generosity the court granted them probation.⁹⁴

In 1750 another bribery scandal rocked the court. It involved the education commissioner of Sichuan. As in 1741, the case involved a Hanlin academician who was sent out to serve as education commissioner. The scale of the sale of local degrees was shocking when the Qianlong court learned that both licentiate and dynastic school slots were sold by the commissioner for 4,000–5,000 taels of silver. The emperor noted in his 1752 edict that such corruption had even reached the palace examination. The Sichuan case had palace implications, because the accused education commissioner was the son-in-law of Zhang Tingyu (1672–1755), an important court minister under both the Yongzheng and Qianlong emperors, who had retired in 1750. Unhappy with the implications that the court had known about the actions, the Qianlong emperor decided to allow the education commissioner to expiate his crimes through official work.⁹⁵ Ironically, the Manchu court would also begin to see the official “sale” of degrees as a lucrative way to pay for military campaigns. If the demand for degrees was driving the corruption, why not legalize it?

Such complaints moved the issue from moral exhortation to the problem of gaining mastery over a huge constituency of licentiates increasingly outside the government’s control.⁹⁶ The 1750s and 1760s witnessed a barrage of court orders badgering local education officials with a host of requirements: (1) they must report on the evaluation of licentiate behavior; (2) local officials must control the sale of civil degree titles; (3) the

moral character of licentiates must be reviewed; and (4) those licentiates who lived more than 100 *li* (Chinese miles = 0.555 kilometers) away had to report regularly to local education officials. And again in 1769, the Ministry of Rites set up a special examination for those candidates of high moral character who were recommended by education commissioners. This time the Qianlong emperor established a regular quota for them.⁹⁷

Because of the corruption, scrutiny of provincial education commissioners and local education officials heightened. For instance, Weng Fanggang (1733–1818), a Hanlin member since 1752, was frequently appointed by the court as a provincial examiner beginning in 1759. Later in 1764 he was sent out to serve as commissioner of education in Guangdong province. After two terms, however, he was accused of submitting a report on licentiates enrolled in dynastic schools in which the ages of some of the students was wrong. Given the likelihood of foul play, this finding sufficed to have Weng removed from office, even though he was still technically a Hanlin reader. Weng lived in retirement for a year before returning to the Hanlin Academy.⁹⁸

The recommendation process took hold in the 1770s and 1780s as education commissioners filled their triennial quotas for moral paragons. In 1789, however, Weng Fanggang, who returned to grace and was education commissioner in Jiangxi province, noted that the recommendation of licentiates of high moral character had diminished the value of the qualifying examination because moral character was still not evaluated in the latter. Weng recommended that the evaluation of moral character take place for all local examinations.⁹⁹ Things became so difficult that Ruan Yuan (1764–1849), while education commissioner in Zhejiang from 1795 to 1798, prepared policy questions actually asking licentiates how to prevent cheating.¹⁰⁰

Numbers of Licentiates by 1850 and the Purchase of Local Degrees

One of the consequences of the Yongzheng- and Qianlong-era reforms was that many licentiates were removed from the local dynastic school roll and lost their legal privileges. Beginning with the Jiaqing reign (1796–1820), the court remained on alert but no longer took an activist stance concerning licentiates. In 1811, the court tried to redress the un-

foreseen consequences of establishing a regular quota for candidates of high moral character by limiting to three the maximum number of such candidates an education commissioner could name. The problem now was that too many were nominated. In 1819, the court stipulated that licentiates who had had their status abolished and wished to restore it could have their case reviewed by local officials.¹⁰¹ Too many had been summarily removed. During the Daoguang era (1821–1850), the court kept up the local review of licentiates and controlled their reinstatement when required. In 1824, the court regularized the process for removing or reinstating licentiates by appealing to fair, public standards. Many had not really reformed. Rather than just preach to the choir, Jiaqing and Daoguang tried to lessen the legal punishments and cajole licentiates to comply.¹⁰²

The selection of candidates of high moral character was regularized in the early nineteenth century. In an 1829 order, the court took to task those education commissioners who reported candidates of high moral character by dividing them into first- and second-class examples of moral excellence. The court thought this bureaucratization of morality disingenuous. In 1835, the emperor decreed that social customs and moral minds went hand in hand and advised local officials to use practical guides to evaluate the status of licentiates and not rely purely on the literary aspects of examinations.¹⁰³

In 1851, however, another local examination boycott occurred, this one in Nanhai county, in Guangdong. Students protested against a local prefect, whom they had pressured to favor them on the local examination. When this failed, they refused to allow anyone to enter the yamen to take the examination, hoping to target the prefect as the object of the general boycott. The court was furious and did not allow any of the students to take local examinations again. This decision generally followed the 1734 precedent concerning the 1733 boycott in Kaifeng but with less recrimination. On the eve of the Taiping Rebellion in 1850, the politicization of the civil examinations was common, a legacy that was duly noted in an 1856 edict by the Xianfeng emperor (r. 1851–1861).¹⁰⁴

The sheer numbers of local candidates and licentiates by 1850 overwhelmed the dynasty's capacity through its education and examination officials to maintain the fairness of the civil selection process. The

examination and yamen compounds were filled to the brim, as more and more candidates sought to pass examinations and try to gain at least licentiate status. Table 6.1 reveals that before 1850 there were over half a million civil licentiates and over 200,000 military licentiates that local education officials and the provincial educational commissioner were tracking. In addition there were more than 350,000 dynastic school students who achieved licentiate status through irregular means, such as purchase of a lower degree.

Table 6.1. Quotas and Geographical Distribution of Licentiates by Province before 1850.

Province or Social Category	Civil Quota	Civil Licentiates	Military Quota	Military Licentiates	Total Shengyuan	Percent
Zhili	2,845	59,745	2,418	24,180	83,925	11.4
Shaanxi	1,865	39,165	1,585	15,850	55,015	7.4
Shandong	1,830	38,430	1,556	15,560	53,990	7.3
Zhejiang	1,800	37,800	1,530	15,300	53,100	7.2
Henan	1,631	34,251	1,386	13,860	48,111	6.5
Shanxi	1,536	32,256	1,306	13,060	45,316	6.1
Jiangsu	1,402	29,442	1,192	11,920	41,362	5.6
Sichuan	1,366	28,686	1,161	11,610	40,296	5.4
Jiangxi	1,350	28,350	1,148	11,480	39,830	5.4
Guangdong	1,326	27,846	1,127	11,270	39,116	5.3
Yunnan	1,323	27,783	1,130	11,300	39,083	5.3
Anhui	1,289	27,069	1,096	10,960	38,029	5.1
Hunan	1,219	25,599	1,006	10,060	35,659	4.8
Fujian	1,187	24,927	1,009	10,090	35,017	4.8
Hupei	1,087	22,827	924	9,240	32,067	4.3
Guangxi	1,019	21,399	866	8,660	30,059	4.0
Guizhou	753	15,813	640	6,400	22,213	3.0
Banners	109	2,289	93	930	3,219	0.4
Fengtian	71	1,491	60	600	2,091	0.3
Merchants	81	1,701	—	—	1,701	0.3
Total	25,089	526,869	21,233	212,330	739,199	100
Licentiates (<i>Shengyuan</i>)					739,199	68
Purchased degrees (<i>Jiansheng</i>)					355,535	32
Total degreed gentry					1,094,734	100

Sources: Chang Chung-li, *The Chinese Gentry: Studies on Their Role in Nineteenth-Century Chinese Society* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1955), 150, table 20, and 111, table 8. Chang's table has been rearranged, and errors have been corrected. See also Huang Guangliang, *Qingdai keju zhidu zhi yanjiu* [Research on the Qing dynasty civil examination system] (Taipei: Jiaxin Cement Co. Cultural Foundation, 1976), 377–425.

With a constituency of about 1.1 million degree-holders empire-wide, of whom only 2.2 percent were higher civil and military provincial and palace degree-holders, the Qing dynasty had its hands full keeping the machinery of county, department, prefectural, provincial, and metropolitan civil and military examinations operating fairly and efficiently.¹⁰⁵ As the population of China rose from perhaps 250 million in 1700 to 350 million in 1800, the levels of competition to get into the cultural prisons of the dynasty became unbearable. Over three million candidates strained to enter the open doors of local examinations.

After 1850, however, the examination doors were closed in the Yangtze delta during the Taiping Rebellion, when the Qing dynasty total population reached about 450 million. Table 6.2 discloses that the total of degreed literati after 1850 reached almost 1.5 million, an increase of 36 percent over pre-Taiping estimates, at a time when the general population had increased by about 50 percent.

Almost 650,000 were civil licentiates and another 260,000 were military licentiates. The largest pools of examination candidates were licentiates and irregular students, who were all roughly comparable in classical literacy by 1850. When the more than two million nondegreed local candidates for local examinations are added to the total, the Qing dynasty had perhaps up to three million classically literate males before 1850, which increased to some four to five million after the Taiping Rebellion. They could no longer be accommodated in China's cultural prisons and had to find careers elsewhere, such as the modernizing sectors of China associated with Western learning and new military schools and factories.¹⁰⁶

In response, the rationalization and legalization of the sale of degrees gained support. Needing money, the court between 1837 and 1848 clarified regulations for purchasing licensing degrees. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Qing dynasty entered a second protracted period (the first since the 1670s) when the dynasty used the sale of local degrees to pay for military campaigns. In 1815, commoners were allowed to purchase local degrees in their place of birth to raise funds for the dynasty. Later in 1824, the sons and grandsons of those in Anhui province who donated supplies for military campaigns in the middle Yangtze region were permitted to purchase degrees. In 1829, this policy was

Table 6.2. Quotas and Geographical Distribution of Civil Licentiates by Province after 1850.

Province or Social Category	Civil Quota	Increased Quota	Civil Licentiate	Military Quota	Military Licentiate	Total Sheng-yuan	Percent
Zhili	2,888	2,892	60,732	2,545	25,450	86,182	9.4
Zhejiang	2,177	2,214	46,494	1,948	19,480	65,974	7.2
Jiangxi	2,020	2,087	43,827	1,837	18,370	62,370	6.8
Sichuan	1,918	1,972	41,412	1,735	17,350	58,762	6.5
Shandong	1,953	1,965	41,265	1,730	17,300	58,565	6.5
Henan	1,868	1,892	39,732	1,665	16,650	56,382	6.2
Jiangsu	1,768	1,804	37,884	1,587	15,870	53,754	6.0
Guangdong	1,748	1,789	37,569	1,574	15,740	53,309	5.9
Hunan	1,647	1,689	35,469	1,486	14,860	50,329	5.5
Shanxi	1,626	1,634	34,314	1,438	14,380	48,694	5.3
Anhui	1,604	1,636	34,356	1,440	14,400	48,756	5.3
Fujian	1,555	1,590	33,390	1,399	13,990	47,380	5.2
Hubei	1,534	1,577	33,117	1,388	13,880	46,997	5.2
Yunnan	1,372	1,372	28,812	1,207	12,970	40,882	4.5
Shaanxi	1,236	1,246	26,166	1,096	10,960	37,126	4.1
Guangxi	1,132	1,143	24,003	1,006	10,060	34,063	3.7
Gansu	889	890	18,690	783	7,830	26,520	2.9
Guizhou	767	767	16,107	671	6,710	22,817	2.5
Fengtian	159	162	3,402	143	1,430	4,832	0.5
Banners	142	145	3,045	128	1,280	4,325	0.5
Merchants	110	131	2,751	—	—	2,571	0.3
Total	30,113	30,597	642,537	26,806	268,060	910,597	100
Licentiates (<i>Shengyuan</i>)						910,597	63
Purchased degrees (<i>Jiansheng</i>)						533,303	37
Total degreed gentry						1,443,900	100

Sources: Chang Chung-li, *The Chinese Gentry: Studies on Their Role in Nineteenth-Century Chinese Society* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1955), 152, table 22, and 111, table 8. Chang's table has been rearranged. See also Huang Guangliang, *Qingdai keju zhidu zhi yanjiu* [Research on the Qing dynasty civil examination system] (Taipei: Jiaxin Cement Co. Cultural Foundation, 1976), 377–425.

expanded to give those caring for their parents (and thus unable to take examinations) the right to purchase degrees.¹⁰⁷

Table 6.3 demonstrates that as the regular degree route decreased by over 25 percent from 73 percent in 1764 to 44 percent in 1871, the percentage of officials who purchased initial degrees increased precipitously by 27 percent, from 22 percent in 1764 to 51 percent in 1871. Table 6.4 provides figures for the number of dynastic school degrees by province that were purchased before 1850. The average cost for dynastic school status (*jiansheng*) was more than 100 taels of silver, and nine

Table 6.3. Percentage of Officials Becoming Local Officials through Civil Examination, Yin Privilege, or Purchase during the Qing Dynasty.

Year	No. of Officials	Examination (%)	Yin (%)	Purchase (%)	Other (%)
1764	2,071	72.5	1.1	22.4	4
1840	1,949	65.7	1.0	29.3	4
1871	1,790	43.8	0.8	51.2	4.2
1895	1,975	47.9	1.2	49.4	1.5
Increase or decrease		-24.6%		+27.0%	

Sources: Ping-ti Ho, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), p. 49, table 2. Cf. Li T'ieh, *Zhongguo wenguan zhidu* [The Chinese civil service system] (Beijing: Chinese Political University, 1989), 171.

provinces sold over 10,000 such degrees in the first half of the Daoguang reign.

Bribery in the yamen compounds between candidates and examiners was conveniently superseded by the legitimate purchase of degrees, which cut out the examiners as middlemen. In the Daoguang era, what earlier was deemed corruption was legalized in the flurry to sell degrees to raise money. Efforts to counteract this trend were only partially successful during the Tongzhi Restoration (1862–1874), one of whose priorities was the abolition of the sale of degrees.¹⁰⁸ Feng Guifen (1809–1874), then a leading reformer and a Hanlin academician since 1840, noted in a chain argument:

In the past ten years [the 1850s], sales of rank have been frequent, and civil government has therefore been weakened. When civil government is weakened, social ferment becomes critical; when social ferment becomes critical, the public revenues are strained; when the public revenues are strained, there is increased sale of rank. This is the way in which one rebellion leads to another. In discussion of present-day governance, I consider the abolition of sale of rank to be the highest priority.¹⁰⁹

The Qing government succumbed to the pressures of fundraising. It had enforced detailed rules and regulations to fight against corruption

Table 6.4. Number of Degrees Purchased and Amount Collected during the Daoguang Reign, 1821–1850, by Province.

Province	1821–1835		1836–1850		Total		Percent
	Amount (Taels)	Degrees Sold	Amount (Taels)	Degrees Sold	Amount (Taels)	Degrees Sold	
Jiangxi	2,383,790	22,368	1,757,290	16,184	4,141,080	38,552	12.3%
Guangdong	2,667,061	24,950	1,436,082	13,314	4,103,143	38,264	12.2
Jiangsu	2,548,746	23,956	1,174,364	10,513	3,723,110	34,469	11.0
Zhejiang	2,080,258	19,474	1,464,856	14,395	3,545,114	33,869	10.5
Hunan	1,865,732	17,117	1,158,266	10,596	3,023,998	27,713	9.0
Henan	1,332,410	12,629	1,083,558	10,134	2,415,968	22,763	7.2
Fujian	1,250,582	11,450	939,932	8,685	2,140,514	20,135	6.4
Hubei	1,401,990	13,220	727,290	6,740	2,129,280	19,960	6.3
Anhui	874,682	8,241	722,268	7,443	1,596,950	15,684	4.7
Sichuan	1,093,950	10,314	502,440	4,653	1,596,390	14,967	4.7
Shaanxi	940,976	8,850	316,062	2,927	1,257,038	11,777	3.7
Shandong	680,716	6,409	491,131	4,550	1,171,847	10,959	3.5
Guangxi	591,198	5,535	436,716	4,044	1,027,914	9,579	3.0
Shanxi	475,794	4,545	162,846	1,505	638,640	6,050	1.9
Yunnan	199,332	1,868	238,798	2,214	438,130	4,082	1.3
Guizhou	129,540	1,687	166,266	1,548	345,806	3,235	1.0
Total	20,803,953	195,133	12,901,693	120,402	33,705,646	315,535	100

Source: Chang Chung-li, *The Chinese Gentry: Studies on Their Role in Nineteenth-Century Chinese Society* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1955), 153, table 23. Chang's table has been rearranged, and errors have been corrected.

inside examination compounds, that is, the use of money to gain unfair advantages. Now the sale of 315,000 degrees in 1820–1850 resulted in a lowering of classical standards, which Zhang Zhidong, then Hubei education commissioner, noted in an 1868 memorial to the throne. Errors in local examination papers were so common that Zhang counted over fifty classically illiterate papers on one examination alone. Zhang noted that this was in part the result of the ravages of war. Cheating was still rampant, according to Zhang, who emphasized to the court the need to return to rigorous standards of earlier periods. The irony was not missed: an education commissioner was now lecturing the court about public morality and examination discipline, which had been compromised by the state's sale of licentiate and dynastic school degrees.¹¹⁰

We will see in Chapter 7 how the distance between official “Way learning” orthodoxy and the philological research findings in Qing

dynasty classical and historical studies began to widen. In the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the controversy over Ancient Learning and the gradual emergence of Song Learning versus Han Learning as competing classical orthodoxies began to impact the provincial and metropolitan examinations. Sagehood in light of “Way learning” might remain an orthodox ideal in 8-legged essays, but among empirically minded evidential research scholars the Song and Ming program for self-cultivation was increasingly deemed naive and impractical.¹¹¹

From Ming to Qing Policy Questions

The Changing Typology of Policy Questions

Examiners had long subordinated policy questions (lit., “questions on the classics, histories, and current affairs” *jingshi shiwu ce*) to the 8-legged essays on the Four Books and Five Classics (see Chapter 2). As a result, historians have overlooked policy questions and missed their long-term evolution from the Former Han dynasty to the end of the civil examinations in 1905. These two millennia of policy questions should be evaluated in light of the examination essays that began in the Song and the 8-legged essay that lasted for 400 years. Policy questions reflected the intellectual vicissitudes from the early and middle to late empire. But “policy” answers during the late empire frequently did not only involve current government policy. Instead, examiners also defined such questions in light of the Classics and Dynastic Histories, which shed light on classical repertoires, literary expression, statecraft, and practical affairs.¹

The policy answers of Former Han erudites, for example, also became stylistically praised and emulated. During the Ming, Tang Shunzhi (1507–1560), a leading literary stylist, included Han policy answers as model essays of “ancient-style prose” in his literary compilation.² Policy essays, like 8-legged essays, were also valued during the Ming for their

aesthetic and literary standards. Han policy essays, not contemporary-style examination essays (*shiwén*), were the lead writings that Tang Shunzhi chose for his literary volume. Policy answers prepared by the top three finishers in the triennial palace examinations were particularly heralded and included in many Ming and Qing dynasty collections.³

In addition to the policy question divided into several parts on the palace examination, candidates were required to answer five policy questions during the third session of the provincial and metropolitan examinations. Perhaps the most famous policy essay ever written in Chinese history was the approximately 10,000-character answer composed by the celebrated Southern Song loyalist Wen Tianxiang for the 1256 palace examination. Wen's essay was written when the Southern Song capital of Hangzhou was threatened by the Mongol invaders, explaining perhaps why the emperor's question was on "Way learning" views of eternity rather than the present.⁴

Since the Yuan dynasty, the policy question had been retained to test classical and historical knowledge applied in contemporary affairs.⁵ Although subordinate to the Four Books and Five Classics, Ming examiners and scholars deemed policy questions essential and thus prized them as markers of the confluence between classical theory and practical affairs. The prestige of policy questions peaked during the Jiajing (1522–1566) and Wanli (1573–1620) reigns, when each answer often reached over 3,500 characters, the equivalent of a major treatise.⁶ Two large-scale compilations of outstanding policy questions and answers were published during this period. The first, completed in 1604, was arranged by reign period and topic; it contained samples of metropolitan and provincial policy questions between 1504 and 1604.⁷ The collection was later enlarged in 1633 into a second series that included questions from sessions two and three of the civil examinations from 1504 to 1631.⁸

Usually the emperor chose metropolitan examination policy questions, although by Qing times, Hanlin examination officials typically sent a list of topics and asked the ruler to circle the topics he wanted on the provincial and metropolitan examinations.⁹ The palace policy question was broken down into four separate topics. In addition to composing the palace examination policy question, Ming and Qing emperors as a rule read the top ten essays on the palace examination and determined

their final rankings, leaving the rest for the palace readers.¹⁰ Often, however, Qing emperors read only the top three papers.¹¹ During the early reigns, Manchu emperors continually criticized examiners and candidates alike for relegating policy questions to relative obscurity. The Yongzheng and Qianlong emperors frequently lamented the literary focus in examination essays and tried to encourage attention to more practical matters.¹² A review of the 1760 provincial examinations by the Hanlin Academy revealed that in Shanxi examiners had not even graded the policy questions. The academicians speculated that other provinces were guilty of similar lapses.¹³

The Hanlin academician Wu Shengqin (1729–1803) headed the staffs of several provincial examinations during the Qianlong reign. In 1771, he prepared a policy question for the Hubei provincial examination, in which he asked candidates to review the history of policy questions on civil examinations and to assess the long-winded questions. Examiners were using policy questions to transmit their own views, and their attention no longer focused on the quality of the answers.¹⁴ Policy questions were frequently over 300 characters in length, while the policy answers, because they mattered less in the final rankings, were not much longer. Some contended that the examiners were merely prompting the candidates to parrot the examiners' views. This was called "repeating familiar questions" and "asking a question and then answering it," that is, the examiner both asked the question and answered it in the phrasing of that question.¹⁵

To keep the answers from becoming shorter than the questions, a requirement was added in 1786 stipulating that a policy answer had to have a minimum of 300 characters. In the eighteenth century, policy questions became a bone of contention between the court and its Hanlin examiners. The court feared unauthorized policy questions, as had occurred in the late Ming, while the examiners tried to impress candidates with their erudition and thereby influence classical and literary taste. Examiners' questions were often more interesting historically than the answers. As answers grew shorter, the questions grew in length, but they tell us about the examiners' intellectual concerns and changing historical contexts.

We have valuable provincial records that reconstruct the range of policy questions prepared by examiners in Yingtian (Nanjing) prefec-

Table 7.1. Ming Dynasty Policy Questions Classified by Topic: Yingtian Prefecture, 1474–1600, 230 Questions, Top 15 Ranks Only.

Rank	Topic	Percentage of Total	Selection Probability
1	Learning/Selection	9.6	43.4
2	Way learning	8.3	37.5
3	Ming rulers	7.4	33.5
4	World-ordering	7.0	31.6
5	Economy/Statecraft	5.7	25.8
6	Ruler-official	5.2	23.5
7	National defense	4.3	19.4
7	Classical studies	4.3	19.4
9	Law	3.5	15.8
9	Military matters	3.5	15.8
11	Literature/Poetry	3.0	13.6
11	Natural studies	3.0	13.6
13	History	2.6	11.8
13	Agriculture	2.6	11.8
13	Customs/Values	2.6	11.8

Source: *Nanguo xianshu* [Record of civil examination success in the Southern Capital Region], compiled by Chang Chaorui. Ca. 1600 edition.

Note: The probability for each policy question is calculated based on the assumption that each of the five selections is mutually independent. If the selection of five questions were mutually dependent, then the probability for each type would be slightly higher. Most “topics” above and below are based on actual Chinese categories. I have added a few, such as “natural studies,” which combines categories including “astrology,” “calendrical studies,” and “mathematical harmonics.” In the case of “classical studies” versus “philology,” which of course are overlapping fields, I have separated them to show the increasing importance of the latter in late imperial times (see Table 7.2 for “Philology”).

ture during the Ming dynasty and in Zhejiang province (Hangzhou) during the Qing dynasty. For Yingtian, the Ming records cover questions for forty-seven provincial examinations over 126 years, from 1474 to 1600. On Zhejiang provincial examinations, we have Qing lists of policy questions for ninety-two examinations covering 213 years, from 1646 to 1859. The probability and range of policy questions during the Ming and Qing in these two southern regions are summarized in Tables 7.1 and 7.2.

Ruling out, for the moment, significant regional differences between Nanjing and Hangzhou (both are in the same region) and historical divergences between the Ming and Qing, the results reveal three major trends: First, classical studies increased in frequency (from 4.3 percent to 14.1 percent) and in probability (from 19.4 percent to 63.7 percent) as

Table 7.2. Qing Dynasty Policy Questions Classified By Topic: Zhejiang Province, 1646–1859, 460 Questions, Top 15 Ranks Only.

Rank	Topic	Percentage of Total	Selection Probability
1	Classical studies	14.1	63.7
2	Learning/Selection	10.7	48.4
3	Economy/Statecraft	9.6	43.4
4	World-ordering	7.8	35.3
5	History	7.4	33.4
6	Way learning	6.1	27.6
7	Literature/Poetry	5.1	23.1
7	Local governance	5.1	23.1
9	Philology	4.2	18.9
10	National defense	3.8	17.2
11	Law	3.1	14.0
11	Literati training	3.1	14.0
13	Agriculture	2.7	12.2
13	Military matters	2.7	12.2
15	People's livelihood	2.2	9.9

Source: *Benchao Zhewei sanchang quanti beikao* [Complete listing of all questions from the three sessions of the Zhejiang provincial civil examinations during the Qing dynasty], compiled ca. 1860.

policy questions from the Ming to the Qing, ranking seventh overall in Ming Yingtian and first in Qing Zhejiang. Slipping noticeably in frequency of occurrence from the Ming to Qing were questions concerning “Way learning,” which moved from second to sixth. By the eighteenth century, both classical and historical studies had eclipsed “Way learning” as topics for policy questions, a finding that should not surprise us when we take into account the popularity of Ancient Learning and evidential learning during the Qianlong (1736–1795) and Jiaqing (1796–1820) reigns.¹⁶

Second, policy questions on history moved from thirteenth in frequency (2.6 percent) and probability (11.8 percent) in Nanjing during the Ming dynasty to fifth in Hangzhou (7.4 percent in frequency; 33.4 percent probability) during the Qing. Moreover, examiners prepared 73 percent of the history questions on the Hangzhou examinations from 1777 on, thus confirming the late eighteenth-century rise in popularity of historical studies. Of the thirty-three policy questions devoted to history in the Zhejiang examinations during the Qing dynasty, only nine

were asked between 1646 and 1777; twenty-four were asked between 1777 and 1859, when the records stop because of the Taiping Rebellion. History questions ranked a close second in frequency, after classical studies, for the period 1777–1859.

Third, policy questions on natural studies in the civil examinations moved from eleventh in frequency (3 percent) in Nanjing during the Ming to a much lower rank (below the top fifteen, only 0.9 percent of all policy questions) in Hangzhou during the Qing. This noticeable decline suggests either that our usual image of the seventeenth century as a time when Jesuit influence was pervasive has been overdrawn or that the Qing state for political reasons limited questions on the calendar and astronomy, particularly in the early Qing.¹⁷

I should qualify these initial findings. If Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces were not representative of late imperial China, they were representative of the wealthiest coastal provinces in south and southeast China, where the frequency of elite families possessing the financial and cultural resources required to prepare students for the civil examinations exceeded that of provinces in north China and elsewhere. Second, I should reiterate that Qing policy questions were significantly less important than under the Ming. The length of policy answers steadily declined. Consequently, the value of the policy questions on session three changed, while “Way learning” remained the core curriculum of the first session. Examiners and students understood that questions on the first session were the key to the final rankings.

Keeping these important caveats in mind, we nevertheless can see why the Qianlong emperor sought to revive the standing of the third session’s policy questions in the 1750s and 1760s. In general, questions on (1) political economy, (2) classical studies, (3) literature, (4) geography, and (5) history became the top questions in the mid-Qianlong period, and this trend lasted until 1900. The classicist Sun Xingyan (1753–1818) recommended early in the nineteenth century that the five topics for provincial and metropolitan policy questions be set so that “solid learning” (*shixue*), a code for “evidential research,” would prevail among degree candidates. Sun advocated a series of policy questions that would stress literati techniques for governance, classical studies, Ancient Learning, local geography, and fiscal resources.¹⁸

By the nineteenth century, the evolution of policy questions had further stabilized in terms of format and content. The most frequent policy questions generally followed a clear sequence on provincial examinations until the 1900 reforms: (1) classical studies, (2) historical studies, (3) literature, (4) institutions and economy, and (5) local geography. The order and content was not obligatory or always included. Overall, however, questions on learning, statecraft, and world ordering remained the most common policy questions. Moreover, institutional questions remained a dominant concern among examiners. With hindsight we know that Han Learning classicism was destined in the nineteenth century to surpass the Song Learning focus on “Way learning” as the dominant, cutting-edge scholarly discourse in the eighteenth century, which led to changes in the late Qing examination curriculum.

Reliable Learning in Ming Policy Questions

The conceptual roots of Qing dynasty “evidential research” as a category of learning began in the mid-Ming. Earlier claims for the seventeenth-century roots of evidential research remain understated and teleological.¹⁹ Initially, the “search for evidence” (*kaozheng* or *kaoju*) in classical studies was traced back to sixteenth-century debates surrounding the Old Text version of the *Great Learning* (*Daxue guben*), which Wang Yangming restored from the *Record of Rites* (*Liji*) to gainsay Zhu Xi’s externalist views of the “investigation of things” (*gewu*) in the Four Books. For Wang, principles in the mind trumped principles in things.²⁰

Since the mid-Ming, however, examiners for the provincial and metropolitan civil examinations had already focused on what they called “reliable learning” (*kaoju xue*) to describe the role of empirical evidence. As early as the 1445 metropolitan examination, examiners deployed the term to describe the fifth policy answer that dealt with selecting talented men as officials: “This policy answer contains reliable learning; it is very good at answering what was asked for; this is a literatus who deliberates.”²¹

In the Guangxi provincial examination of 1471, “reliable learning” was a guidepost for the evaluations of both documentary and policy questions.²² Four of the five policy answers selected as the best essays were

evaluated in light of these criteria. In each case, the Guangxi examiners stressed that the best answers were based on research and careful sifting of information. On the third policy question, the examiner Dong Jue wrote of the number two ranked provincial graduate Wang Shi's essay on local geography: "This policy answer is clear in its reliable use of evidence; its words and style are so straight-forward it is as if the writer bows before earlier examples of orthodoxy in the temple. How can we not respect it?"²³ Monetary policy as a statecraft issue on policy questions was also a significant example of "reliable learning" on the 1471 examination. The three examiners who evaluated the best essay by Guo Hong clearly outlined the practical and institutional aspects of Guo's answer that they liked:²⁴

Wu Xiang [Huguang education official]: Those who answered this policy question for the most part had views that merely skimmed the surface and revealed nothing; only this answer in presenting reliable learning was focused and detailed; it was good at reviewing institutions; a scholar who has sincerity.

Zhang Xuan [Huguang education official]: In researching the ancient monetary system and in tracing the successes and failures of reform efforts, every knot in the argument is clear; the arrangement is suitable; an answer to select.

Shan Gao [Huguang education official]: On this question dealing with monetary policy, the candidates in the session were mostly baffled by it; only this essay could examine antiquity as the standard for the present and trace the reason why [ancient monetary policies] had not been revived; an especially accurate answer.

In the 1475 metropolitan examination, the chief examiners, both Hanlin academicians, used "reliable learning" to classify the top five policy questions they had chosen for the proceedings. The topics chosen were (1) rulers and officials, (2) human nature, (3) resources, (4) customs, and (5) geography. In his evaluation remarks for the best answer to the second policy question by Wang Ao (see Chapter 2), who finished first on the metropolitan and second on the palace examination, Xu Pu noted: "The five policy questions are divided between 'reliable learning' and judgments of institutional history."²⁵

Similarly, Qiu Jun's comments for the best policy answer by Xie Qian (1450–1531), who was the *optimus* on the palace examination ahead of Wang Ao, stressed that Xie's essay on material and human resources "comprehended Ancient Learning" and revealed him as "a talent who exhibits evidence and practice."²⁶ Qiu's career and influential writings on statecraft via the "investigation of things" (*gewu*) influenced literati learning in the early fifteenth century and reassessed the "Way learning" exalted since the Yongle reign (see Chapter 2).²⁷

Sixteenth-century provincial examinations documented this trend empire-wide. The telling phrases "reliable learning, which is detailed and clear" or "reliable learning that is focused and detailed" became the Ming civil examiner's formula to explain to the court and the candidates the merits of the best policy essay on the topic. For a final example, we can cite the 1535 metropolitan examination, in which the distinguished Changzhou literatus Xue Yingqi (1500–1573?) took his palace degree in the third tier of palace examination graduates, even though he had ranked second on the metropolitan. One of Xue's 8-legged essays for the latter was singled out as the best of its kind on a quotation from the *Mencius*, and another was chosen as a model essay on a quotation from the *Poetry Classic*,²⁸ but Xue was versatile enough to have his essay on paleography selected as the best answer to the third policy question. Because paleography (*wenzi xue*) along with etymology (*xungu xue*) and ancient phonology (*guyin xue*) became the three major fields in Qing dynasty evidential research, it is worth looking at this question to appraise the nature of "reliable learning" in Ming civil examinations and note its difference from more mature evidential research during the Qing.²⁹

The main distinction drawn among the five policy questions was that some stressed the history of institutions and others stressed practical knowledge (*shiwu*) based on "reliable learning" and statecraft. In their policy question on paleography, the examiners described the Classics as the repository of the statecraft ideals of the ancient emperors and kings. They asked the candidates to distinguish the written forms that were used to transmit the Classics from higher antiquity to middle antiquity. The question assumed that "returning to the beginning" would enable literati to "restore antiquity."³⁰

In his model policy answer, Xue Yingqi associated different calligraphic styles with different ages of antiquity, although his answer had uninformed aspects (he claimed tadpole script came before large seal script) when compared with Qing dynasty paleography. In higher antiquity, according to Xue, characters had looked like tadpoles. In middle antiquity, the written forms of characters had evolved into large seal characters, which by the time the Classics had taken form in the Han dynasty were written down in “old text” (*guwen*) or clerical-style script (*lishu*). To recover the ancient forms, Xue contended that Xu Shen’s pioneering Han dynasty paleographical dictionary was essential. The six rules of character formation that Xu Shen adumbrated were the keys to the textual history of the Classics.³¹

This technical discussion, based on earlier discussions of paleography included in Ming encyclopedias, was needed, Xue argued, if literati of the sixteenth century hoped to fathom how the history of calligraphy helped unravel the history of the Classics and, by extension, its original content and the intentions of the sage-kings who had authored them. Xue concluded: “People rely on the Classics to seek the Way. Writing must be linked to antiquity in order to provide proof for the present, and paleography can corroborate it.”³²

The seven examiners were unanimous in their assessment that Xue’s essay demonstrated his “intent to restore antiquity.” The associate examiner Zhou Wenzhu, a Hanlin academician from Zhejiang, made explicit the link between the question on paleography and a sixteenth-century Ming notion of evidence: “This candidate is able to focus his mind on the paleography of the ancients. He is able to bring reliable learning to bear on each item of his answer.”³³ Xue, like many others, had rehearsed answering such questions in practice examinations in his lineage school.³⁴

Similar philological concerns were also raised in 1537, when Xue Yingqi, then serving as magistrate near Ningbo prefecture, Zhejiang, was assigned to help supervise the Fujian provincial examination. One of the policy questions Xue prepared focused on the textual issues needed to grasp the transmission of the Classics since the Qin dynasty’s (221–207 BCE) “burning of the books.” How, Xue asked, could one unravel the authenticity of the Classics under such circumstances? The

forms of writing were again regarded as the vehicle to “restore the past.” Here we can observe how the assignment of examiners could influence the content of the civil examinations, a trend that was repeated during the eighteenth century.³⁵

A clear standard of “reliable learning” in civil examinations emerged by 1500. This standard was employed regularly by examiners in the provincial and metropolitan examinations to grade policy questions through the end of the Ming.³⁶ Such classical standards paralleled the literary criteria used to rank 8-legged essays. Although the third session was less important in the final rankings, Ming policy questions were still an integral part of the final rankings. Policy questions were important enough in mid-Ming examinations to be equated with the “ancient-style prose” (*guwen*) essays associated with Song examination essays.³⁷

Ming forms of “reliable learning” for policy questions can be compared with the scholarly self-consciousness of “evidential learning” standards used by the editors of the “Complete Collection of the Four Treasuries” to evaluate works turned in for inclusion in the Imperial Library in the 1770s and 1780s. Their criteria for evaluating classical scholarship were based on the proper use of sources and verification, stress on precise scholarship, and deployment of philological methods. To be labeled “worthy of consideration as a work in evidential research” (*kaozheng zhi zi*) was the highest praise for works copied into the Imperial Library.³⁸

There were important differences between Ming “reliable learning,” which remained secondary to “Way learning” moral philosophy, and Qing “evidential studies,” which challenged “Way learning” as the model for classical learning. The tie between statecraft and “reliable learning” was the most obvious aspect in Ming times. “Reliable learning” in the Ming did not refer specifically to philology or textual studies (*xiaoxue*), which would be the focus of “evidential studies” in the Qing. The textual focus on paleography in Ming policy questions, for example, placed Xue Yingqi’s classical philology within the context of statecraft studies.³⁹ Ming stress on written characters was complemented by etymology (*xungu*) to trace the meanings of characters over time. What was new in Qing evidential learning, however, was the discovery that the classification of changing sounds, especially in poetic rhymes, was a

more reliable philological technique to reconstruct the ancient meanings of written characters.

Phonology emerged as a discrete textual field in the late Ming, but the field matured and prospered in the eighteenth century to become the queen of evidential studies, with paleography and etymology downgraded as ancillary disciplines.⁴⁰ Ming policy questions never broached ancient phonology as a classical discipline; when sound was raised, it was quickly skimmed over to focus on writing. In Qing policy questions, phonology was the more common topic, although when the Old versus New Text debate peaked in the late nineteenth century, paleography returned to prominence.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the role of “reliable learning” as a standard of evaluation in Ming policy questions represented the first stage of the penetration of specialized knowledge in the civil examinations that later was called “evidential research.”

Similarly, the fields of history, natural studies, and evidential studies evolved in ways that allow us to see how pervasive the shift to evidential Learning in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was. As before, the court and the bureaucracy managed to keep up with the times and incorporated the views and interests of the dynasty’s leading elites.

Natural Studies in Ming Policy Questions

The examination ethos had also carried over into the domains of medicine, law, fiscal policy, and military affairs during the Northern Song dynasty. For example, Shen Gua (1031–1095) wrote that during the Huangyou reign (1049–1053) civilian candidates were asked to prepare essays on astronomical instruments. The essay writers were all confused about the nature of the celestial sphere. Because the examiners were ignorant of the subject, all candidates passed with distinction.⁴² After the Southern Song dynasty, only military examinations remained institutional fixtures parallel to the civil service.⁴³ But technical fields such as law, medicine, and mathematics, common in Tang and Song examinations, were replicated in Ming examinations.⁴⁴

When faced with foreign rule (first under the Mongols and later under the Manchus), significant numbers of literati, in addition to the usual number of those who failed in the biennial and triennial competitions,

turned to occupations outside the civil service such as medicine. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when demographic pressure meant that even provincial and metropolitan examination graduates were not likely to receive official appointments, many literati turned to teaching and scholarship as alternative careers. In what follows we will see how Ming examiners used policy questions on natural events to discuss astronomy and promote calendar reform.⁴⁵

Ming Interest in Natural Studies

Ming civil examinations tested the candidates' knowledge of astronomy, the calendar, and the natural world (*ziran zhi xue*). "Natural studies" since the Yuan dynasty often were classified using the Chinese word *gezhi* (lit., "investigating and extending knowledge"), an abbreviated term that was retained until its replacement in the early twentieth century by the Japanese term for modern science, *kagaku* (*kexue* in Chinese).⁴⁶ Early Jesuit translations of Aristotle's theory of the four elements (*Kongji gezhi*, 1633) and Agricola's *De Re Metallica* (*Kunyu gezhi*, 1640) into classical Chinese, for example, had used the abbreviated Chinese version of the longhand term for "investigating things and extending knowledge" (*gewu zhizhi*) for the Latin *scientia* (meaning "specialized learning") in their titles.⁴⁷ During the Song, earlier works on mathematics and astrology had been banned from publication for security reasons. Only dynastic specialists working on the calendar in the Astronomy Bureau were allowed such knowledge, even though in practice popularly printed calendars and almanacs were widely available.⁴⁸

Such constraints eased under the Mongols, but in the early Ming, the Yongle emperor stressed calendrical and practical studies as official literati scholarship. He ordered Xie Jin, the chief examiner for the 1404 metropolitan examination (on which 472 graduates drawn from over 1,000 candidates were selected and appointed to high offices) to include questions that tested a candidate's "broad learning" (*boxue*). More important, the emperor legitimated "natural studies." Thereafter, such questions regularly appeared on Ming civil examinations.⁴⁹

Candidates for Ming provincial examinations could expect a policy question on astronomy, and a large number of the 50,000 to over 75,000 provincial candidates empire-wide were prepared to answer such a ques-

tion. In the Qing, the likelihood of such policy questions was negligible. Nevertheless, the ability to deal with astronomical, medical, mathematical, and other technical questions was an essential tool of the new classical studies emerging in the late Ming and early Qing. It just was not tested in the Qing civil service until 1860.⁵⁰

Ming Policy Question on Calendrical Studies

After a series of inaccurate eclipse predictions in 1517–1518, officials recognized that the Ming calendar and the Astronomy Bureau were failing, but the prescribed remedy, as in the past, was a call for new personnel and for better management of the Bureau's offices. The Bureau had been overpredicting solar eclipses less often but underpredicting them more, an ominous sign for the dynasty. The reform of the calendrical system itself was not yet considered necessary. Moreover, the Bureau, because of the low prestige of its middle-level personnel, was not in a strategic position to affect calendrical debates at court.

Calendar reform, that is, the changeover of the computational system, remained an imperial prerogative that usually responded to criticisms and recommendations from outside the Bureau. Until officials associated with the Jesuits appealed to the emperor and his court for a substantial reform of the Grand Concordance astronomy system in the 1630s, the government was content to rely on special supervising officials or to recruit new talent for the Bureau. This policy, however, opened the door for the Ming and Qing courts to accept Jesuits as calendrical experts, just as Tang and Yuan rulers had accepted Indians and Muslim specialists. The issue was serious enough, however, to be taken up in examination policy questions of the time.⁵¹

For the 1525 Jiangxi provincial examination, examiners prepared a policy question dealing with “calendrical methods” (*lifa*). In the first part, they asked the candidates to elaborate on the methods the ancients employed to order the calendar, which they noted “had been the immediate priority of all ancient kings and emperors in bringing order to the empire.”⁵² Next the examiners explained that the astronomical systems of the Han, Tang, and Song dynasties all followed the precedent of the Triple Concordance system (*Santong li*) of 104 BCE. The latter calendar based its computation on a Day Divisor (*rifa*) and Accumulated Years

(*jinian*) counted from a set epoch. They asked (1) why the calendar frequently had to be revised; (2) why the current system had introduced an Annual Difference (*suicha*) constant in addition to the old method of periodically inserting extra lunar months; and (3) why the current system, which employed no epoch, was accurate enough to have been used for two centuries without revision.

Candidates needed a sound knowledge of both mathematical astronomy and its history to answer these questions, which was available in the Dynastic Histories, particularly those of the Jin and Yuan dynasties, when significant reforms were promulgated,⁵³ and in statecraft-oriented encyclopedias. When the Triple Concordance system adopted a Day Divisor of 81, which amounted to setting the length of a lunar month as $29 \frac{43}{81}$ days, and counted Accumulated Days from an epoch 143,727 years in the past, it was inevitable that the small discrepancy in the Ming constant of 29.53086 minus the modern value of 29.53059 days, which equaled an error of only one day per 310 years, would accumulate over time to become appreciable.⁵⁴

Succeeding computational systems simply adjusted the Day Divisor and Accumulated Days without realizing that they unavoidably led to errors. The Yuan Season-Granting system (*Shoushi li*), which the Ming's Great Concordance system (*Da-Ming li*) closely followed, rejected this approach entirely. The Triple Concordance system and its successors had been improved on in the Season-Granting calendar developed in 1280, during the Yuan dynasty, to give more precise measurements of the length of a solar year. The Yuan system adopted precise decimal constants and counted from the solstice of December 1279 rather than an ancient epoch. Without the earlier sources of error, revision of the system became less necessary.

The Annual Difference was a constant that compensated for the slight difference between the tropical or "solar" year (the time it takes the sun moving along the celestial sphere's ecliptic to pass the same point twice, for instance, the interval between two winter solstices) and the sidereal year (the time it takes for the sun to line up twice with the same star, related to the celestial equator). Functionally, the Annual Difference corresponds to the precession of the equinoxes in Western astronomy. It first appeared in the Yuan system because the latter roughly used spheri-

cal trigonometry and thus had to deal in new ways with the discrepancy between motion along the equator and that along the ecliptic of the celestial sphere.

Candidates were reminded that (4) the celestial orbits were invisible and known only through conjunctions of the sun and moon. Why, the examiners asked, did solar eclipses in the *Documents Classic*, the *Poetry Classic*, and the *Springs and Autumns* annals occur only on the first day of the month (by definition, the day of conjunction), while those from the Han dynasty on sometimes fell on the last day of the month? The reason is that, first, times associated with records in the Classics were not precise; and, second, until the Han neither observation nor calculation could yield precise timings of either conjunctions (the true new moon) or eclipses.

The fifth part of the question dealt with various proposals to alter the Yuan-Ming system because like its predecessors it was bound to show accreted errors:

Of those who have discoursed on the calendar from antiquity to today, some say that there can be a determinate method [i.e., a theory]. Some deny it on grounds that all one can do is periodically adduce observations to keep the computational system in accord with the phenomena. But if there actually is a determinate method, it will make it possible to predict on the basis of constants; techniques of observation to track the orbits are not [comparably] dependable. These arguments are all recorded in historical documents and are open to scrutiny.⁵⁵

The question had no correct answer, but it raised a perennial issue of Chinese astronomy, the tension between prediction based on continual observation, interpolation, and extrapolation, on the one hand, and, on the other, forecasts derived from rigorous mathematical techniques that did not require continual infusions of new data.⁵⁶

One of the answers (by an unknown candidate) focused on the chief theoretical question. His response from a literary point of view was formally stereotyped and astronomically well informed. It is unclear how many other such essays were as knowledgeable. The candidate began

with a neat antithesis: Because there has been no change in the sky as we have known it from antiquity on, “I don’t believe the declaration that there is no definite method.” Because of undeniable irregularities in the orbital motions of the sun, moon, and planets, “I don’t believe the declaration that there is a definite method.” He quoted verbatim the early Classics enumerated in the question, with glosses to summarize what was known about the astronomy of antiquity, and he gave precise Han dynasty values for the Day Divisor and Accumulated Years. He also quoted historical sources, including a maxim of the astronomer-geographer and classicist Du Yu (222–284): “Creating an astronomical system is a matter of conforming celestial phenomena [lit., “the sky”] to find what [techniques] accord with them, not forcing accord so that predictions will be validated [by phenomena].” This led him naturally to his answer. “The orbits in the sky are not uniform, but astronomy [between Han and Song] was restricted to set methods, because they were not aware of ‘conforming to the sky to find what accords with it.’”⁵⁷

The answer to the second question was extraordinary in its recall of techniques and their interrelation. The response noted that the calendrical discrepancy was too small to be noted in antiquity. Although the Season-Granting system was the first to master it, a succession of astronomers beginning with Yu Xi (ca. the early fourth century) worked out empirical corrections for precessional error. The candidate listed and accurately summarized the techniques. He understood that these adjustments anticipated the Annual Difference, indicating he had digested the account in the *Yuan History* of the Season-Granting system’s predecessors.⁵⁸

The combined response to the third and fourth questions was similar. The author summarized successive improvements in determining the time of conjunction and eclipse. These improvements, combined with the substitution of actual and varying solar and lunar motions for mean (average) motions, yielded a level of precision that avoided error for more than 150 years. Here the candidate did not entirely depend on the account in the *Yuan History*, citing changes in the Ming period.⁵⁹

In the final question, the candidate made short work of current debates: “In my ignorant opinion, if you have the right people [to manage astronomical computation], then discussion [of cumulative errors] is

permissible; if not, I fear that superficial discussion is best not permitted.” Here he explicitly cited a report in the *Yuan History* that made it clear that the Season-Granting system was tested against records covering more than two millennia of phenomena and extending beyond the borders of China. The author concluded not altogether correctly that remarks about the limits of its precision must be misinformed. Periodic divergences in the Annual Difference did not compromise the computational system, so long as errors when no longer negligible were corrected by observation. He even noted that the refined instruments used in the Yuan calendar reform were fully documented and could be reconstructed for this purpose (he was unaware that they had, in fact, been reconstructed in 1421 and were extant).⁶⁰ A generation before the arrival of the Jesuits, the candidate recommended reviving the instruments bequeathed to the astronomical bureau since the 1280 reforms.⁶¹

This call for calendar reform and rebuilding instruments was just as quickly framed in orthodox “Way learning” rhetoric. The answer closed with a quotation from Zhu Xi that, however irrelevant to mathematical astronomy, moved the focus back to the imperial throne: “The kingly ruler, if he is able to make yang predominant so as to ensure its victory over yin, then the [yin] moon will avoid the [yang] sun, so there can be no eclipses.” The candidate conventionally declared that “as a rustic scholar of the lowest sort who has never received transmission from a [qualified] teacher, I merely set out what has been recorded in the Classics and Histories, without daring to assert that it is true.”⁶²

The candidate’s ability to recall technical data from ancient sources and quote them accurately from memory was impressive. In addition, his appeal to Yuan instrumentation as a corrective measure in the sixteenth century suggests that the policy question had been formulated as a way for the dynasty to get some response about what to do with the Ming Grand Concordance Calendar, which was increasingly out of whack. The candidate argued that the dynasty should rely on expert instrumentation to reform the calendar. Rather than technical manuals, however, the candidate cited Dynastic Histories as his sources, which indicates that what the examiners also expected was knowledge of the role of the calendar in political life and awareness of the difficulties in keeping the official calendar accurate and up to date.

The examiners did not grade this essay so high solely because of the details in its answers. These were astronomically informed and high-minded, unimpeachably orthodox (thus the citation from Zhu Xi), compounded of conventional sentiments culled from broad reading, and estimable for their rhetorical structure and balance. They represented, in other words, an astronomical counterpart for a good essay on morality or governance. The fact that there were astronomical counterparts adds to the evidence that the humanistic bias of imperial orthodoxy, as it affected the educations of civil service careerists, did not effectively discourage knowledge of science, medicine, technology, statistics, finance, and so on. Passing this 1525 civil examination demanded thorough study and general recall of highly technical material.

The straw that broke the camel's back came in 1592, when the Ministry of Rites charged that the Astronomy Bureau had erred by a full day when predicting a lunar eclipse, which meant that the Relief Ceremony had to be rescheduled. An error of a full day also affected ceremonies tied to the first day of the month, season, and the new year. In 1595, a Ming prince with exceptional mathematical talent, Zhu Zaiyu (1536–1611), proposed a new calendar, which he called the “Ten Thousand Year System for Sagely Longevity.” Zhu tried to combine the Yuan and Ming calendar systems, but because his synthesis was not based on new observations it failed to make the prediction of eclipses any more precise at a time when accuracy was expected within one mark (which equals 14 minutes).⁶³

The Ministry of Rites never tested Zhu's proposal. In 1596, Wang Honghui (1542–1601?) broached with Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) the possibility that Ricci might contribute to the reform discussions. In 1597 the scholar-official Xing Yunlu (1573–1620), who had written a work comparing ancient and recent calendars, claimed that the procedures employed in the Ming calendar to determine the winter solstice were in error by one day, thus extending the error to encompass a full season. The director of the Bureau dismissed its critics, however, and defended the calendar as a stable institution that should not be recklessly changed. This intransigence left the door open for the Jesuits to harvest the benefits of the Gregorian calendar reforms in Rome and introduce new procedures for improving the Ming calendar after 1600.⁶⁴

The Complementarity of Classical and Natural Learning

The example above demonstrates how dangerous it is to assume that classical learning and natural studies were opposed. Specialized knowledge about astronomy and the calendar made some difference in the cultural prestige and social status of literati-officials vis-à-vis the experts employed in the Astronomy Bureau. As generalists versed in the classical orthodoxy that granted them the highest social, political, and cultural prestige, Ming officials knew how astronomy, mathematics, and calendrical studies were part of the imperial apparatus of ritual. They were not hostile to understanding the role of natural phenomena in governance.

The literatus was expected to be a moral paragon who made his classical degree, earned by examination, relevant to his bureaucratic position. Classical statecraft was premised on the linkage between classical learning and political competence. That competence was not measured by the literatus's status as an expert in "natural studies." Part of it, however, involved using his knowledge of the Classics to understand the role of astronomy and the calendar in governance. In the policy questions above, technical learning was not the ultimate object of the question. Examiners expected candidates to place technical learning within the classical world ordering bequeathed by the sage-kings.

Accordingly, the policy questions on natural studies were restricted to fields relevant to bureaucratic governance and discussed in the basic Classics, or at least read into them by the early commentaries. Other fields such as medicine and alchemy were inappropriate for the civil curriculum. It was important that astronomy and mathematics were discussed in the earliest Classics, while medicine and alchemy developed their own "classics" much later. The "wrong" answer to such policy questions would indicate that the candidate had failed to grasp the heterodox implications of any effort to observe phenomena in the heavens or on earth in ways that challenged the dynasty in power.

The policy question and answer delivered in the precincts of an examination compound made natural studies part of the orthodox system. By placing them within the curriculum and by promoting technical knowledge, the examiners successfully domesticated astronomy and the

calendar. Literati were chosen for officialdom in this way because they knew that the moral terms of their political success presupposed the subordination of expert knowledge to “Way learning,” which translated via civil examinations into bureaucratic power.

From the angle of the cultural hierarchy in place, which paralleled the social and political hierarchies, the Ming state justified natural studies as the proper concern of the classical generalist precisely because it could thereby be brought within the orthodox system. Experts, as long as they were subordinate to dynastic orthodoxy and its legal representatives, were necessary parts of the cultural, political, and social hierarchies. The literatus-official coexisted with the calendrical expert in the bureaucratic apparatus but at higher levels of political status, cultural prominence, and social prestige. The Ming civil examinations, therefore, were not remarkable because they included policy questions on natural studies. They were remarkable because they successfully encapsulated natural studies within a system of political, social, and cultural reproduction that guaranteed the long-term dominance of the dynasty, its literati, and the “Way learning” orthodoxy.

The Elimination of Natural Studies in Early Qing Examinations

In the Qing period, policy questions on natural studies were rare when compared with the Ming dynasty. In the 1660s, for example, examiners for the Shandong civil provincial examination prepared a policy question on astrological portents. One of the candidates, totally ignorant of the subject, disguised his answer by discussing geography instead. Thinking he had failed, the candidate was surprised to see his name on the list of graduates. He read through the examiner’s comments: “The question was on astrological portents and the answer combined this with discussion of geography. The candidate can be praised as a learned and refined literatus.”⁶⁵ Geography and astrological studies were overlapping fields in earlier dynasties, but during the early Qing this linkage was broken when the court banned policy questions on the calendar and celestial studies. Thereafter, geography, particularly local geography, flourished as a source for provincial and metropolitan policy questions.⁶⁶

For political reasons, the Manchu throne sought to monopolize calendrical studies because it was potentially a volatile area of expertise in

which Chinese, Muslims, and Jesuits all had axes to grind. The early Manchu manipulation of the civil examination (e.g., examinations were drastically reformed in 1664 and then unreformed in 1667; see Chapter 8) and the contemporary calendrical debates between Jesuits and literati-officials, which challenged the orthodox cultural system during the Ming-Qing transition, were connected and worried the Manchu court about divisive questions on the calendar in civil examinations.⁶⁷

The collapse of the Ming dynasty and rise of Qing under non-Han rule created opportunities until 1685 for experts in astronomy to break out of their subordinate positions and challenge discredited Ming elites for political power. The cultural importance of astronomical expertise was not lost on the new dynasty as it sought to reformulate its calendrical legitimacy as quickly as possible. Such technical concerns outweighed for a time the cultural distinction accumulated by literati via mastery of classical studies.

Not until the 1680s, when the Manchu dynasty mastered its political and military enemies, did the social fluidity of the early decades of the Qing disappear, leaving Han literati and Manchu elites in a precarious balance at the top (and calendar specialists—Muslims and Jesuits—again in the middle or near the bottom) of the political and social hierarchies, which lasted into the eighteenth century. In the process, provincial and metropolitan policy questions on natural studies virtually ceased. The hard-fought court victory of Western learning by the 1680s, manipulated by the Manchu court, precluded any accommodation with natural studies as had marked Ming civil examinations. In place of the banned natural studies, historical geography in particular prospered as an acceptable field in Qing civil examinations, although Jesuit mapmaking was kept off limits by the throne.

By 1715, the Kangxi emperor had banned the public study of astronomical portents and the calendar because they pertained to dynastic legitimacy. The emperor decreed in 1713 that all examiners assigned to provincial and metropolitan civil examinations were forbidden to prepare policy questions on astronomical portents, musical harmonics, or calculation methods. The latest works in Qing astronomy and mathematics, court projects on which the Kangxi emperor had employed Jesuit experts, were put off limits to examiners and examination candidates.

This ban on natural studies was stipulated within a general effort by the court to keep astronomy and astrological discussion of auspicious versus inauspicious portents out of public discussion.⁶⁸ The Yongzheng emperor later changed Kangxi's policy by admitting imperial students with specializations in astrology into the dynastic schools. In the Qianlong reign, literati increasingly studied astronomy and mathematics both privately and publically.⁶⁹

The Changing Role of Historical Knowledge

In the sixteenth century, when examiners prepared policy questions on history, their focus was on Song dynasty efforts to align history with the moral certainties of "Way learning." They attacked historians who followed the Han historian Sima Qian (145/135–90 BCE) and his topical approach (*jizhuan*) on moral grounds, particularly because Sima was sympathetic to Daoism. The Han-Tang genre of historiography prioritized style and language, but its authors had missed the forest for the trees, according to Ming examiners sympathetic with "Way learning." When broaching the difference between annalistic (*biannian*) and topical history, examiners frequently asked candidates to point out the strengths and weaknesses of the two genres. In this context, Sima Qian was presented as the historian who had led the change in ancient historiography away from "praise and blame" (*baobian*) chronicles to topical histories.⁷⁰

Ming policy essays contended that after Confucius only Zhu Xi had recaptured the orthodox significance in the rise and fall of dynasties. In Ming policy questions, "political legitimacy" (*zhengtong*) was the historical correlate to the "legitimate transmission of the Way," which Ming literati traced back to Confucius and Mencius. In both philosophy and history, literati after the Han had lost their way. The moral vision of antiquity was not restored in classical and historical studies until the Song.⁷¹

In Qing policy questions on history, however, the earlier focus on "Way learning" historiography receded into the background and moralizing historiography became less important. In the process, Sima Qian and Ban Gu (32–92) reemerged as historical models for the best of Han

topical historiography. Just as Qing dynasty classicists stressed Han dynasty classical studies over now suspect Song and Ming “Way learning,” so too did eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Han Learning historians emphasize Sima Qian (author of the *Historical Records*) and Ban Gu (author of the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*), rather than Zhu Xi, as exemplary historians because of their stressing of the facts.⁷²

Early Qing examiners curtailed the scope of “Way learning” in their policy questions on classical and historical studies. There was a clear diminution of Zhu Xi as a historian. No longer was history automatically reduced to the Classics. No longer was historiography simply a question of the proper moralizing historiography. But neither were the Classics completely reduced to history. Nor were the historical Classics denied their priority. Changes were brewing, but another century would pass before literati oriented toward evidential studies would begin to gainsay the priority of the Classics and dissolve classicism into historical studies. In the late seventeenth century, Qing dynasty policy questions on history reflected the more historically oriented and less moralizing views of the examiners. Along the way the examiners expressed what was then a common position among Qing literati concerning the provenance of the Histories: “The *Springs and Autumns* annals is a Classic of history; [Sima] Qian and [Ban] Gu are the patriarchs of history.” The late Ming exclusion of Han historians from the lineage of orthodox historiography was effectively over.⁷³

In the middle of the Qing dynasty, the Zhejiang literatus Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801) enunciated what became one of the most famous slogans in late imperial and modern Chinese intellectual circles: “The Six Classics are all Histories.” In Zhang Xuecheng’s time, the preeminent position of the Classics was challenged. In their place, eminent eighteenth-century literati-scholars from the Yangzi delta, such as Qian Daxin (1728–1804), Wang Mingsheng (1722–1798), and Zhao Yi (1727–1814), among others, placed historical studies at the pinnacle of literati learning. In the early Qing, Gu Yanwu already had complained that historical studies had declined during the Song and Ming dynasties because of excessive concern in civil examinations on literary talent and the moralizing tendencies of “Way learning.” He urged restoration of Tang dynasty-style examination essays devoted solely to history.⁷⁴

In the eighteenth century, the perennial relationship between Classics and Histories remained important among orthodox literati, with the rise in status of historical studies to parity with classical studies, but the demarcation between the universality of the Classics and the particularity of the Dynastic Histories was called into question. Such doubts penetrated the imperial civil service examinations. The noted evidential research scholar Lu Wenchao, while serving as a senior examination official at the 1767 Hunan provincial examination, prepared one of the five policy questions in which he asked the candidates to reconsider the relationship between the Classics and Histories: “The Histories have different uses from the Classics, but they derive from the same sources. The *Documents Classic* and *Springs and Autumns* annals are the historical records of the sages, which have become Classics. Later ages honored the latter and divided [the Histories and Classics] into two genres. Can you grasp and explain it?”⁷⁵

Others went further in claiming there was no difference between the Classics and Dynastic Histories. This artificial division of genres, Qian Daxin contended, had not existed in the classical era. Rather, the demarcation of genres was first used in the “four divisions” (*sibu*) system of classification after the fall of the Later Han dynasty, when the Classics were demarcated from History, Masters, and Literature for the first time. On these grounds, Qian rejected the priority given the Classics over History and concluded that both were essential sources for retrieving antiquity. Placed in its own proper historical context, then, Zhang Xuecheng’s often cited claim that “the Six Classics are all Histories” reflected the growing historicization via evidential studies of literati learning in the eighteenth century.⁷⁶

In addition, two of the Five Classics (the *Documents* and the *Springs and Autumns* annals) were historical in format and content. Because candidates before 1787 chose to specialize on either the *Documents* or the *Annals* in relatively large numbers (25–27 percent), we can also conclude that history was an important part of the first session of the civil examinations, even while the frequency of policy questions focusing on history was increasing from the Ming to the Qing. Around 20 percent chose the *Documents Classic*, and another 6–7 percent usually selected the *Annals* for their specialization. Consequently, about one-quarter of the provin-

cial examination graduates chose a Classic dealing with history for their specialization. This number is not minimal, but it does lag behind the number who chose the metaphysics and cosmology of the *Change Classic* (30–35 percent) or the literature of the *Poetry Classic* (30–35 percent).

The changing nature of policy questions in the civil service examinations from the Ming to the Qing dynasty is confirmed by the new role historical knowledge played vis-à-vis classical studies after 1750. Late imperial examiners who prepared the policy questions devoted a substantial proportion of them to the study of history, a trend that increased in the nineteenth century. In addition, most policy questions that did not take history as an object of scholarly focus presumed that candidates would prepare a historical account of the topic, whether dealing with institutions, Classics, flood control, local governance, or another topic.

Overall, the impact of evidential studies on historical research reflected the changing intellectual trajectories between classical studies and historical studies in the eighteenth century. During the late Qing, historical studies gradually replaced classical studies as the dominant framework for scholarly research. In the early twentieth century, the eclipse of classical studies was complete. Growing out of the impact of Qing evidential studies on historical sources, Gu Jiegang (1893–1980) and others who participated in the debates concerning ancient Chinese history in the 1920s made the Classics the object of historical study, not the premise for historical studies.⁷⁷

Ancient Learning in Qing Policy Questions

In the mid-Qing, the Classics and Dynastic Histories were carefully scrutinized by Yangzi delta textual scholars and bookmen who took advantage of the urban commerce in manuscripts, antiquities, and rare books. The steady emergence of evidential research studies in the delta as a self-conscious field of academic discourse was predicated on the centrality of philology to (1) determine the authenticity of classical and historical texts; (2) unravel the etymologies of ancient classical terms; (3) reconstruct the phonology of ancient Chinese; and (4) clarify the paleography of Chinese characters. These trends, as we have seen in this chapter, began in the late Ming but climaxed under the Qing.

Ming “reliable learning” and Qing “evidential research” agendas for accumulating knowledge represented a major reorientation in thought and epistemology among classical scholars throughout south China. Evidential scholars favored a return to the most ancient sources available, usually from the Han and Tang dynasties, to reconstruct the classical tradition. Because the Han was closer in time to the actual compilation of the Classics, Qing scholars utilized Han works (hence after 1820 called “Han Learning”) to reevaluate the Classics. Frequently, this change entailed a rejection of Song sources (hence called “Song Learning”) in study of the Classics because the Song was separated by over 1,500 years from the classical era and because many Qing scholars were convinced that the “Way learning” followers of Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming had unwittingly incorporated heterodox doctrines into the canon.⁷⁸

The shifting content of policy questions dealing with classical learning (*jingxue*) reveals the degree to which the philological discoveries associated with Ancient Learning filtered into the civil examination system. Although a test of cultural and political loyalty, whereby examiners praised the Qing reign for nourishing classical studies, the exploration of the textual vicissitudes surrounding the long contested “Old Text” chapters of the *Documents Classic*, for example, required precise information that would demonstrate to the examiners that the candidate was aware of the authenticity controversy surrounding the Classic. Rather than a test of cultural orthodoxy, the question raised potentially corrosive issues that could challenge orthodox “truths.” One of the key Old Text chapters thought by many literati to be a medieval forgery was the “Counsels of Yu the Great” (“Ta Yu mo”), which contained classical lessons about the “human mind” and “mind of the Way,” on the basis of which the theories of “orthodox statecraft” and “legitimate transmission of the Way” were constructed (see Chapter 1).⁷⁹

Such textual concerns might be considered unique to the Yangzi delta because the academic community there had been pioneers in reviving Ancient Learning concerns and appropriating evidential research techniques for classical and historical studies. But changes in civil examination questioning were occurring empire-wide, principally through Qing appointments of provincial examiners, who frequently came from the Yangzi delta and thus were conversant with the latest research findings

of classical scholars. Yangzi delta scholars had long been the most successful on the metropolitan and palace examinations in Beijing and thus were the most likely to gain appointment to the Hanlin Academy and the Ministry of Rites (see Chapter 3). Most who served as provincial examination officials were chosen from these two overlapping institutions in the metropolitan bureaucracy. Examinations held in the outer provinces in the North, Southwest, and Northwest all reveal the magnitude and scope of the scholarly changes promoted by Yangzi delta literati examiners after 1750.

Consequently, policy questions during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries increasingly reflected the changing intellectual context within which the imperial civil service examinations were administered. Although the quotations from the Four Books and Five Classics presented during sessions one and two of the metropolitan examinations remained, for the most part, unchanged in content and governed by orthodox “Way learning” interpretations, Ancient Learning trends penetrated both provincial and metropolitan examinations through the policy questions of session three.

In 1793, metropolitan examiners asked palace candidates to address controversies surrounding the four orthodox commentaries to Confucius’s *Springs and Autumns* annals, particularly the debate over the reliability of the ancient *Zuo Commentary* (*Zuozhuan*), whose author, Zuo Qiuming, many regarded as one of Confucius’s direct disciples.⁸⁰ Earlier in 1792, the court minister Ji Yun had taken a difference tack and memorialized the throne concerning Hu Anguo’s (1074–1138) Song dynasty commentary as one of four required commentaries. Ji argued that the Song commentary should be removed from the dynastic school curriculum because of its more than 1,500-year distance from the date of the Classic itself. The commentary enunciated “Way learning” themes that evidential scholars such as Ji Yun thought were anachronistic.⁸¹

Ji also contended that Hu Anguo used the *Annals* as a foil to express his own opinions about the fall of the Song and the move of the Song court to the South (see Chapter 1). Hu had virulently attacked the barbarians in his commentary, particularly attacking the Jin Jurchen precursors of the current Manchus. The Qianlong emperor vehemently rejected all such interpretations of the *Annals* because of their possibly deleterious

effects on Manchu-Chinese relations. For his part, Ji preferred the three Han commentaries, which had informed the Kangxi-era edition entitled *Imperially Prescribed Commentaries and Explications of the Annals* (*Qinding chunqiu zhuanshuo huizuan*) and which refuted the Hu version on many points. The Qianlong emperor responded immediately by ordering that beginning in 1793 the Hu commentary would be eliminated from the civil examinations. This symbolized the victory of evidential learning at court. Thereafter, only the three Han commentaries were regarded orthodox, and the Hu commentary fell into oblivion (see Chapter 8).⁸²

Before the Opium War (1839–1842) and the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), many literati reevaluated their cultural tradition and the forms of education through which native values were transmitted. The cumulative effects of these new initiatives eventually were felt in private academies and imperial examinations at the provincial and capital levels. Although the attitude-forming role of civil examinations remained central even after reforms were initiated, its content-expressing function increasingly took on more significance and emphasis during the eighteenth century. Rulers still asked candidates to demonstrate their political loyalty to the reigning dynasty and allegiance to the moral orthodoxy and the political status quo. But visible cracks appeared in the moral orthodoxy, which literati brought on through their participation in eighteenth-century evidential studies. The political implications of these classical tremors were not felt fully until the late nineteenth century.⁸³

Official examiners in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were conscious of Han dynasty contributions to Qing classical and historical studies. Mirroring their larger community of scholar-officials, they tried in the early nineteenth century to bring Han and Song Learning together and thereby achieve a balance between moral training and classical erudition. “High” Qing curricular reform, our final topic, became one of the key differences between the unchanging Ming and Qing civil examinations. Classical knowledge in sessions one and two had not changed between 1384, when Ming civil examinations took their final form, and the period 1756–1793, when the reformed “High” Qing curriculum began to take final shape. Manchu rulers turned the curriculum debate in their favor.

Before 1800, we have evidence that the civil examination system was undergoing important internal changes in content and direction, even as

it remained the key governmental institution for political and social reproduction of gentry-officials. When criticized before 1850, civil examinations were still considered superior by most literate Chinese to alternative systems of recommendation for public office. We will see that the Qing dynasty was able to keep pace with the times by carrying out a series of important curriculum changes during the second half of eighteenth century. These reforms reinvigorated the civil examination system from the Qianlong era until the Taiping Rebellion. At no time since the Northern Song reforms had so much effort been spent on reforming the classical curriculum for the civil examinations.⁸⁴

Curricular Reform: From Qing to the Taipings

IN THE LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, evidential research penetrated civil examinations empire-wide through the initiatives of examiners who were tied to the Yangzi delta and other southern literati. During the Qianlong reign, they embraced evidential techniques as a legitimate textual means to restore ancient classical learning. Court ministers tied to the Imperial Library such as Ji Yun also stressed Han dynasty sources for the examination curriculum as a whole. Beginning in the 1740s, officials in the Hanlin Academy and the Ministry of Rites debated a series of new initiatives that challenged the classical curriculum in place since the early Ming. As a result, the “Way learning” denunciation of Tang-Song belles lettres in civil examinations was overturned. Qing officials restored pre-Song aspects of the civil examinations that had been eliminated in the Yuan and Ming dynasties.

Eighteenth-century Qing reforms were overtaken in the nineteenth, however, by a rising tide of demographic and social challenges that peaked during the Taiping Rebellion, which in the 1850s and 1860s almost overthrew the dynasty. The Taipings while in power put into play in the Yangzi delta a new, Christianized ethos informing the Taiping civil examinations. This decade set in motion a series of social, economic, and political challenges that late nineteenth-century reformers within the Qing state could never fully resolve. After 1895, Westernization

and anti-Manchu sentiments left little room for appreciating civil examinations that were tied to an increasingly deserted classical canon. Never refuted but increasingly irrelevant, the “Way learning” persuasion fell together with the examination system that had reproduced it and the literati elites who had believed in it.

Ming-Qing Continuity

The Ming-Qing format for civil examinations reiterates what remarkable continuity existed in the classical curriculum from 1384 to 1756 (see Table 8.1). Since the early Ming, the classical curriculum for dynastic schools and public examinations continued to emphasize the Four Books, Five Classics, and Dynastic Histories. In addition to the “Way learning” commentaries for the Four Books and Five Classics and works on nature and principle used since the Yongle reign, the Kangxi emperor also promoted the *Essential Meanings of Nature and Principle* (*Xingli jingyi*) as a convenient compendium of orthodox moral teachings.¹

Essays were still required in 8-legged essay form, and candidates were still expected to master the orthodox interpretations of the Cheng-Zhu “Way learning” school. Those entering the Hanlin Academy included their views of imperial orthodoxy in their classical lectures for the emperor, which were reinstated in 1655. Until the Kangxi reign, the Qing dynasty copied the Ming civil examination regime. As a result of increases in maximum essay length, however, the task of grading papers by readers and examiners increased proportionally. Despite a substantial

Table 8.1. Format of Provincial and Metropolitan Civil Examinations, 1384–1756.

Session One	Session Two	Session Three
1. Four Books (three quotations)	1. Discourse (<i>Lun</i>)	1. Five policy questions
2. Five Classics (four quotations each)	2. Documents (imperial mandates, admonitions, memorials)	
	3. Judicial terms (reasons for conferring decisions)	

Note: All candidates specialized on one of the Five Classics until 1787.

increase of personnel from the mid-Ming to the Qing, their massive reading load prevented them from paying adequate attention to essays prepared during the second and third sessions. Typically overlooked, as we saw in Chapter 7, were the policy questions.²

Another change was the increasing frequency of metropolitan, provincial, and local examinations under the Qing. Beginning in 1659, the Manchu court periodically added “grace examinations” (*enke*), which celebrated imperial enthronements or special birthdays of both emperors and empress dowagers. Most were added after 1736, when the Qianlong emperor favored his literati with seven “grace examinations” during his sixty-year reign. These privileges, when appropriate, were also extended to provincial and local examinations. Twenty-four percent of the 112 Qing metropolitan examinations were “grace examinations,” which helped to produce a total of 26,747 palace graduates, some 2,153 (or 8.7 percent) more than in Ming times.³

Literati and Official Debates on Examination Reform, 1645–1750

As early as 1645, Han literati appealed to the Manchu throne to reduce the emphasis on 8-legged essays for the metropolitan and provincial civil examinations. Some also asked that a poetry question be added to session two and that the policy questions be eliminated in favor of a memorial to complement the other documentary questions on session two. The regents, speaking for the young Shunzhi emperor, chose instead to follow to the letter the Ming curriculum with its stress on “Way learning” commentaries.⁴

Despite the Qing court’s initial conservatism, dissenting Ming literati unhappy with the civil examinations were increasingly vocal during the early Qing. In the 1657 Shuntian provincial examination, for example, examiners noted that the classical curriculum had changed over time. They noted that since the Yuan and Ming, however, the curriculum had stagnated and become irrelevant to contemporary themes. In one policy question, the examiners discussed reforming the curriculum. Later during the Qianlong reign, the court initiated unprecedented curricular reforms.⁵

Private Views of Examination Essays

In 1645, the Yangzi delta literatus Lu Shiyi (1611–1672) proposed changes for 8-legged essays. Lu and the late Ming examination critic Huang Chunyao, discussed in Chapter 6, were concerned about civil examinations. Many Ming loyalists opposed the Manchus, but they were powerless to prevent the Qing court from co-opting civil examinations to select Han officials loyal to the new dynasty. Lu Shiyi, who favored “Way learning,” appealed in his private writings for changes in the examination questions and format rather than wholesale overhaul.⁶ Lu’s basic position was that the Ming civil examinations had focused too much on 8-legged essays and not enough on discourse and policy questions. Book learning had become secondary to literary flair in producing formalistic essays that would catch the examiners’ attention.⁷

Lu proposed that all levels of the civil examinations be revamped. For the provincial and metropolitan examinations, two instead of three sessions would suffice because questions on documentary style and legal terms were useless. Although the first session should still emphasize essays on the Four Books and Classics to “clarify the principles of the Way,” the second session should emphasize policy questions on “contemporary affairs” for the final rankings. Lu stressed that specialized fields such as water control and astronomy should also be part of the curriculum. More knowledgeable graduates would be the result.⁸

Diao Bao (1603–1669) had received a provincial degree in 1627, but he lived in isolation after the Manchu conquest. Addressing the literati community in his private writings, Diao attributed the decline of “true learning” to the pervasive influence of examination essays. “True learning,” according to Diao, was based on “true writing.” Without the latter, the “true statecraft” of the sages was discarded in favor of flowery prose of little relevance. Diao called for the elimination of 8-legged essays completely.⁹

Ming loyalists also carried over to the Qing their concerns about the educational defects in civil examinations. A host of early Qing literati, such as the mathematician Mei Wending (1633–1721), blamed Ming literary examinations for the failure of the dynasty.¹⁰ Gu Yanwu spent two chapters in his acclaimed *Record of Knowledge Earned Day by Day* (*Rizhi*

lu), first printed in 1670, on technical aspects of the Ming examinations, in which he was generally critical of their operation.¹¹ Gu also described a selection system rife with inequities, cheating, and favoritism. Its primary feature was its police-like surveillance of candidates, which fostered intimidation rather than learning: “The error in today’s examinations is that the way of seeking talent is insufficient, while the methods of preventing criminal acts are excessive.”¹² In his 1633 *Record of a Wait for an Enlightened Ruler in a Time of Darkness* (*Mingyi daifang lu*), passed around privately, Huang Zongxi exclaimed that “the errors in the examination system had never been as serious as today.” Citing Zhu Xi’s critique of examination essays, Huang added that the policy questions should receive equal consideration in a candidate’s final standing. The dynasty should also rely on earlier avenues of recommendation. Men of talent could bring honor to the civil examinations, but the examinations themselves were of questionable value.¹³

Early Qing literati reciprocated such feelings about the civil examinations. Most felt that during the late Ming, 8-legged examination essays had deteriorated into a formalist exercise.¹⁴ In essays initiated in 1645 and completed in 1663, Wei Xi (1624–1681) advocated that the policy questions take precedence over other questions. He proposed accomplishing this goal by moving the policy questions from the third to first session and eliminating the 8-legged essay from the test. Candidates for office would be forced to master political affairs and their historical vicissitudes. Practical learning would replace empty literary exercises. Wei Xi thought that the officials chosen through the late Ming civil service had failed in their responsibilities.¹⁵

The Oboi Reforms

These literati debates turned out to be more than rhetoric. After six cycles of triennial provincial and metropolitan examinations dating from 1645, which had followed the Ming model, the Manchu court, then under the Oboi Regents ruling in the name of the child-emperor Kangxi (r. 1662–1722), called for examination reform in 1663. Wei Xi completed his essay “Policy for Examination Questions” (“Zhike ce”) that same year. The Qing court suddenly abrogated the 8-legged essay. In local licens-

ing, renewal, and qualifying examinations, policy and discourse questions replaced quotations from the Four Books and Five Classics.

The 1657 Shuntian provincial examination scandal and other corruption and tax evasion cases in the South soured the regents on civil examinations. Court efforts to control Yangzi delta literati involved in the 1661 tax case paralleled the first Ming emperor's efforts to control his Suzhou enemies via quotas for northern versus southern degree-holders (see Chapter 1). The Oboi Regents as military men were also skeptical of purely literary qualifications for office. Ironically, their reform closely followed the proposals made by dissenting literati who had survived the Ming-Qing transition. Table 8.2 strongly suggests the influence of the many Han Chinese officials under Manchu authority, such as Wei Yijie (1616–1686), who was the main advocate for abolishing the 8-legged essay. Wei had championed reform of the “Discourse” (*Lun*) essay in 1659. For that essay he wanted examiners to draw on topics from the imperially compiled *Elaborated Meanings of the Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing yanyi*) rather than repeat the perennial Ming dynasty themes about the sage-kings drawn from Song “Way learning” masters.¹⁶

In addition to rescinding the requirement that everyone must follow the 8-legged essay form, the 1663 reform also reduced the questions

Table 8.2. Format of Provincial and Metropolitan Civil Service Examinations during the Early Qing Dynasty Reform of 1663 (Rescinded in 1667).

Session No.	No. of Questions
One	
1. Policy questions	5 essays
Two	
1. Four Books	1 essay (<i>lun</i>)
2. Five Classics	1 essay (<i>lun</i>)
Three	
1. Documentary style	1 document
2. Judicial terms	5 terms

Notes: 1. Such essays no longer had to follow the “8-legged” style.

2. In the actual examination proceedings, session two and three were combined.

3. The requirement to specialize on one Classic was dropped.

based on the Four Books and Five Classics to one each and relegated them to the second session, which diminished their importance. Students were expected to prepare two essays (*lun*), one based on the Four Books and one for the Five Classics. The first session of provincial and metropolitan examinations was transformed. To stress practical questions of government policy and political institutions, the Oboi Regents approved the Ministry of Rites' request to move the five policy questions to the first session. The documentary question and five legal terms from the penal code were added to the second session. The discourse question based on a quotation from the *Classic of Filial Piety* was dropped, however, but it would be restored later.¹⁷ In addition to biennial local examinations, the reforms took effect for the 1664 and 1667 metropolitan and for the 1666 provincial examinations.¹⁸

These innovations produced such uproar among more conservative Han Chinese that they were quickly rescinded by the Kangxi emperor in 1667–1668. The young emperor was in the midst of taking power into his own hands. Understandably, many Chinese preparing for the rigorous Ming-style examinations felt that their financial sacrifices and memorization efforts had been compromised. Others contended that any examination system based on “words and names” rather than “deeds and reality” was imperfect. What was needed was not the essay format but a selection process that assessed a candidate’s “deeds.”¹⁹

Many pointed to these examination reforms as a betrayal of the long-standing “Way learning” orthodoxy. It did not matter that the Oboi Regents were following the suggestions of Chinese literati such as Wei Yijie, who had the ears of officials in the Ministry of Rites. Their reform ideas did not represent the literati mainstream that the young emperor sought to appease, however. In 1665, Huang Ji (d. 1686), then vice minister of the Ministry of Rites, memorialized for a return to the Ming three-session format for the selection process. He contended:

Today, the use of only policy questions and discourse essays, and the elimination entirely of the first session, appears to have made the examinations too easy. Moreover, if the Classics and Histories are not required for the essays, people will not discuss the teachings of

the sages and worthies. Please restore the three sessions [of the examinations] to their old form.²⁰

To avoid a damaging cultural clash between Chinese and Manchus, the Kangxi emperor reinstituted the 8-legged essays. The reformed format was ended, with the Ming three-session format restored in 1669. Although the Chinese reformers had been persuasive enough for the Manchu regents, they were not persuasive enough for their own community. Literary men whom the Kangxi emperor patronized were still avid proponents of 8-legged essays as the correct measure of cultural attainment.²¹ Examinations, for all their faults, successfully performed political, social, and cultural functions that seventeenth-century critics had underestimated and which the Kangxi emperor astutely exploited. Political selection was only one piece in the examination puzzle. Two others were corroboration of local social status and maintenance of “Way learning” orthodoxy, neither of which most local gentry, merchant, or military families wanted challenged. The Qing court quickly caught on to the long-term strengths of the Ming cultural system, which helped ameliorate Manchu-Han relations.²²

It was incongruous that vocal Chinese had wanted to prioritize policy questions over literary essays in the selection process and that when the Qing court tried to oblige them, the difficulties proved insuperable. The failure of the 1664–1667 reforms cuts against the grain of claims that the Manchus used the civil examinations and the 8-legged essay to control the Chinese, a criticism frequently voiced by Chinese nationalists in the twentieth century. They were more reform-minded than Ming dynasty rulers. The Manchus resembled earlier Han Chinese, Jurchen, and Mongol rulers who were savvy enough to understand how the literati competition was useful for political and social control, even if the intellectual results were stultifying.²³

Others noted the limitations of literary examinations but still defended examination essays as worthy forms to present “Way learning” orthodoxy. What had happened in the late Ming, they argued, was that the classical essay had been corrupted by careerism and subverted by heterodox teachings, which was not the fault of the essay form itself.

Followers of Zhu Xi thought that abolishing the 8-legged essay would diminish the impact of “Way learning.” After 1685, when Manchu rule was solidified, many Cheng-Zhu followers were no longer critical of examination essays because of their key role in affirming orthodoxy.²⁴

After the Kangxi emperor took full control in the 1670s, he made it clear that he considered the present selection process inadequate, but he also understood that “circumstances beyond his control” made it impossible to “get rid of civil examinations completely.”²⁵ In 1687, for example, the Ministry of Rites dropped the requirements to prepare imperial documents in the form of imperial proclamations or announcement of posts (*zhao*) and imperial patents or bestowal of titles (*gao*). This change encouraged study of the Five Classics. Because of literati protests, the change was short-lived. Not until 1756 were these changes reintroduced.

The discourse essay was also revisited for changes. In 1690, the Ministry of Rites returned to the Ming model for such questions, focusing again on “Way learning” tracts on “nature and principle” and “theories of the Great Ultimate,” among other collections of Song dynasty writings. In 1723, however, uproar over dropping the *Classic of Filial Piety* forced the Ministry of Rites to reinstate it for the discourse question. In a 1736 memorial, the censor Li Hui recommended that the *Classic of Filial Piety* should be added to the Four Books, bringing them to five to balance the Five Classics. This memorial was set aside because of the authenticity debates that lingered over the Old Text and New Text versions of the *Classic of Filial Piety*, especially when eighteenth-century Japanese editions of ancient commentaries were sent to Ningbo from Nagasaki. In 1757, the debate over the discourse question recurred.²⁶

Reform Efforts during the Yongzheng and Early Qianlong Reigns

Both the Yongzheng emperor and his successor were dissatisfied with the literary focus of the civil examinations. In 1728, Yongzheng approved a Ministry of Rites proposal to select candidates on the basis of their second and third session essays and added that examiners should stop emphasizing the first session’s 8-legged essays at the expense of the last session’s policy questions. The earlier Oboi-era abrogation of 8-legged essays was again entertained.²⁷ In 1732, the emperor complained that li-

terati paid no mind to important questions devoted to statecraft and practical issues on the examinations, because the examiners stressed essays from the first session. Like his efforts to reform education officials (see Chapter 6), the Yongzheng emperor failed to redress the literary focus of the examinations.²⁸

With the support of the Hanlin Academy, the Yongzheng emperor succeeded in creating another layer of examinations for those who passed the palace degree. To the metropolitan and palace examinations, the Hanlin Academy added in 1723 the court examination (*chaokao*), which tested the top-ranked palace graduates and ranked them for entry into the Hanlin Academy. Previously, examinations for Hanlin probationers were held after a select group of palace graduates were accepted into the Academy.²⁹ Despite reservations about literary examinations, the Yongzheng emperor required the court examination to cover literary genres, including a poem composed in five words (meaning syllables, i.e., “pentasyllabic”) and eight rhymes (*wuyan bayun*). This was the first time since the Yuan dynasty that a poetry question was included in public examinations and foreshadowed its reappearance in 1757 in provincial and metropolitan examinations. Later the Jiaqing emperor (r. 1796–1820) reduced the number of essays required on the court examination. Ironically, the Yongzheng emperor succeeded in defining the Hanlin Academy as a literary institute. The renewed focus on poetry reminded many of the Tang Hanlin Academy.³⁰

Although private and public attacks on examination essays increased, little was actually done to answer the charges that “contemporary-style essays” were noninnovative and impractical. There were frequent calls to emphasize the policy questions and to increase attention paid to current affairs. In 1738, however, during the early years of the Qianlong reign, the rhetoric took a new turn.³¹ Rather than Han Chinese literati privately debating the uses and abuses of the civil examinations, two well-placed Manchu court officials, Oertai (1680–1745), then a Grand Secretary, and Shuhede (1711–1777), vice minister of military personnel, took different sides over whether the civil examinations should be abolished.³²

Well-versed in the Classics, Shuhede’s 1744 memorial to the emperor presented four reasons why the entire examination process should be

abrogated. He explained: “Today’s contemporary-style essays are nothing but empty words and cannot be applied.” Shuhede then complained about the process of copying candidates’ papers to ensure they would be graded anonymously, which inevitably meant that the papers took a circuitous route through the wards of the examination compound and were given ingenious but empty evaluations by examiners. Third, Shuhede explained that because candidates specialized on a single classic, they could easily master all the possible quotations from the shortest Classic in several months and prepare classical essays for them in advance.³³ Finally, he complained that many of the questions, particularly the documentary questions on session two, could be answered perfunctorily. Changes were needed in the “way to recruit men of true talent and practical learning.”³⁴

Oertai was a member of the Council of State (*Junji chu*) and supervised the 1742 civil metropolitan examination. In the official report, he defended the stress on examination essays.³⁵ As a chief minister in 1744, he admitted to the Qianlong emperor that everyone knew what the problems were and that reforms in the selection system were needed, but he added that no one had an adequate replacement. He then reviewed the litany of attacks since the famous Tang dynasty criticisms of the sterility of the examination essays. Oertai admitted that all dynasties had recognized the problem but none had provided a solution.³⁶

The reform question was raised by civil examiners for the 13,000 candidates who took the 1744 Jiangnan provincial examination in Nanking. In the fifth policy question, the examiners asked about the very format of the examination the candidates were taking.³⁷ Hu Chengfu, a second-class tribute student from Anhui province, prepared the best answer of the 126 graduates (less than 1 percent passed), and it was included in the final record sent to Beijing. Hu focused on the role of 8-legged essays in Ming civil examinations and presented the position of those who supported the essay. He added, however, that there was another, darker, side to their rhetoric:

Although people know that in the examination essay “prose is a vehicle for the Way” [*wen yi zai dao*],³⁸ they do not know that such prose can also obscure the Way [*wen yi hui dao*]. Similarly, people

know that the essay is a form of writing that establishes sincerity, but they do not realize that the essay also is a form for writing falsehoods. Isn't it clear that the principles and models may be correct, but in the examination compound such intentions for selecting literati can be betrayed?

Hu Chengfu concluded, however, that the 8-legged essay should not be blamed for all the faults in the civil examinations. Questions on the second and third sessions also had to stress "concrete learning" (*shixue*), he added.³⁹

The 1744 disagreement between Shuhede and Oertai carried over from the Council of State to the palace examination. The 1745 policy questions on the palace examination, which were prepared by the Qianlong emperor or by those who spoke for him, also queried the candidates about the historical evolution of civil examinations. Using the 313 candidates on the examination as a public forum, the emperor asked the finalists to tell him if it was realistic to expect that those who wrote the best essays were appropriate for political appointments. The emperor wanted assurance that "public office and scholarship were not separate paths."⁴⁰

In his answer, the 1745 *optimus* Qian Weicheng (1720–1772) clothed his position with the garments of orthodox "Way learning": "Your servant has heard that the empire is ordered by the Way, and the Way is most complete in the Classics." Learning and cultivation of the mind must go hand in hand, Qian contended. The selection of literati for office must be based on their mastery of classical techniques (*jingshu*).⁴¹ Zhuang Cunyu, as *secundus* in 1745, emphasized in his palace essay that long-term peace was "always based on training literati and choosing the best of them for the [dynasty's] service." Zhuang cited Su Shi's and Zhu Xi's positions on the role of belles lettres in examination essays and concluded that even Zhu Xi had wanted to reform the system, not eliminate it. Zhuang took Oertai's side in the court debate.⁴²

The Qianlong emperor heard out both sides in this public debate and concluded:⁴³

We will see if after several years literati still throw themselves into the *Poetry Classic* [to master it for their specialization]. If they

diligently study the learning that has substance and use, then the literary tide will become more glorious, and yield more true men of talent. In the end, however, these endeavors are simply literature. It is doubtful written characters can show whether a person is outstanding or stupid. Consequently, in establishing institutions to select literati we can do no more than this. Moreover, this has no bearing on whether there is imperial order or chaos or whether the dynasty is rising or falling. There is nothing we can do about changing established institutions. The memorials have not provided us with any useful proposals.

As a minister in the Council of State, Zhang Tingyu (1672–1755) opposed dropping the 8-legged essay during the Yongzheng reign. He joined Oertai in 1743 and opposed Shuhede's efforts to drop the civil examinations. When he was asked by the Qianlong emperor to consider the merits of Shuhede's request, Zhang conceded that Shuhede was right about the accumulated faults in the examination system, but the reform proposals were too drastic.⁴⁴ Because Oertai was the son of the former Oboi regent who had abolished the 8-legged essay in 1664, it was ironic that during the early years of the Qianlong reign Oertai defended an examination process based on literary essays that his father had unsuccessfully tried to reform. In the end, Oertai carried the day.

The Aftermath of the 1740s Debate

The Qianlong emperor, however, did not let the matter rest. His officials continually made recommendations through the Ministry of Rites for improving the civil examination selection process, many of which he enacted. The Qianlong reign was the most active period of civil examination reform from the early Ming until the end of the Qing dynasty.⁴⁵ The emperor issued several edicts between 1736 and 1755 to address the literary, classical, and social problems the civil examinations engendered. Moving on many fronts, he tactfully balanced the requirements of the "Way learning" orthodoxy with the rising current of evidential research studies. In addition, the Qianlong emperor addressed the "empty rhetoric" of examinations essays that he felt corrupted both Han literati and Manchu bannermen.⁴⁶

The emperor was trying to please both sides in the 1740s-1750s examination debates, which were increasingly polarized between followers of “Song Learning” and champions of “Ancient Learning.” In the late 1730s, for example, the emperor’s stress on moral practice over literary form was mitigated, when he approved Fang Bao’s request to select, edit, and print a collection of Ming and early Qing 8-legged essays on the Four Books to serve as ancient prose-style models (see Chapter 2).⁴⁷ In 1742, however, Qianlong stressed the need to focus more on the practical aspects of moral character.⁴⁸ Later in 1751, he selected fifty outstanding candidates for office via the guaranteed recommendation route and again emphasized the importance of statecraft over literary qualifications.⁴⁹ Moreover, the Qianlong emperor quickly approved when the Ministry of Rites added a special examination in 1769 for candidates of high moral character recommended by provincial education commissioners after they completed their three-year terms in office.⁵⁰ The Qianlong emperor throughout the 1750s tried to encourage attention to more practical matters.⁵¹

Reform issues were also broached more widely in the policy questions addressing civil examinations. For the 1754 palace examination, the Qianlong emperor raised the issue as the next to last of the five major points in his imperial question to the metropolitan graduates. The *optimus* that year was Zhuang Cunyu’s younger brother, Zhuang Peiyin (1723–1759). His policy answer to this part of the imperial question built on the emperor’s contention that classical essays should be based on the Six Classics. There was no hint in the question or answer that major changes in the curriculum were being planned, but Zhuang’s answer did suggest that both Ming-style classical essays and Song-style belles lettres could be used to satisfy this classical prerequisite.⁵²

The 1754 *secundus*, Wang Mingsheng (1722–1797), also wrote on this issue in his policy answer. He profiled the literary turns the classical essay had taken since the Song and Yuan dynasties. Wang, a distinguished evidential learning scholar and historian, stressed that concerned literati had always redirected corrupt literary currents toward more substantive issues. The implication was that the current 8-legged essay also needed to be brought back to its roots as a classical essay elucidating “orthodox studies” (*zhengxue*) via an “orthodox literary style” (*zheng wenti*). Already

in 1754 there were currents in palace essays that suggested that major changes in the curriculum, which picked up from the 1740s debates, were in the offing.⁵³

First, in 1756, the discourse essay, whose content had been changed and then restored several times between 1659 and 1723, was dropped from the curriculum, along with the documentary forms and legal terms that had been the core of session two. After a year, however, the discourse requirement was reinstated when opposition memorials came in. Surviving routine memorials from 1757–1758 about these changes reveal that in 1758 the Shanxi circuit investigating censor Wu Longjian (1694–1773) called for reinstatement of the discourse essay because of its importance to “Way learning” and imperial orthodoxy.

Wu’s explicit linkage of the discourse question to “Way learning” suggested that removing it was part of a general pattern in favor of the more ancient Five Classics popular among evidential scholars during the Qianlong reign. During the Ming and early Qing, the candidate who wrote the best discourse essay on provincial or metropolitan examinations had usually been the one whose essays on the Four Books were also highly ranked. The correlation between high ranking on the discourse essay and the final rankings had begun to decrease in the Qing after 1654.⁵⁴ Gainsaying claims that the discourse essay was useless unless it emphasized the *Classic of Filial Piety*, Wu countered that the moral basis of the dynasty was at stake. If the discourse essay, which required candidates to study the *Essential Meanings of Works on Nature and Principles* prepared under the auspices of the Kangxi emperor and issued in 1715, were dropped, then the orthodox learning of Song literati would be lost and the cultural legitimacy of the Qing dynasty imperiled. Wu urged the emperor to show his support for “Way learning” by making the discourse essay part of the shortened first session where it would receive even more attention than before. The Qianlong emperor agreed to the compromise and moved the discourse essay to the first session.⁵⁵

From Reformism to System Maintenance, 1750–1850

Beginning in 1756–1757, the provincial and metropolitan format for degrees, which were unchanged for 372 years, was dramatically trans-

formed. The initial changes became permanent in 1759.⁵⁶ Quotations from the Four Books remained on the first session, but in deference to the popularity of Ancient Learning, and due to the problems in the quotas for classical specialization, the Five Classics were moved from session one to become the core of session two. The classics were replaced in the first session by the discourse essay on the Song masters, which was moved up from the second session.⁵⁷ Along with quotations from the Classics, students also had to compose a poem in eight-rhyme regulated poetry during session two. As before, the policy questions remained relegated to the last session.⁵⁸

In the 1760s, efforts to position policy questions on a par with 8-legged essays were unsuccessful, but the Qianlong emperor had examiners publish a collection of the best policy answers prepared during provincial examinations from 1756 to 1762. Patterned after Fang Bao's imperial collections of 8-legged essays, this midcentury collection of policy answers highlighted the value of such essays. In the end, however, policy questions under the Qing remained window dressing when compared with the role of the Four Books and Five Classics.⁵⁹

The Poetry Revival and Classicism in the Eighteenth Century

The revival of the Five Classics and Tang poetry reversed the "Way learning" classical regime stressing the Four Books and the 8-legged essay. Revival of Ancient Learning, particularly pre-Song forms of literati writing and scholia, brought in its wake an increased awareness of the role of poetry and belles lettres in Tang and Song civil examinations and intellectual life. The epochal shift toward the examination essay, which began in the Song, had run its course by the mid-eighteenth century. Despite some misgivings, the Qianlong emperor called in the 1750s for the increased use of poetry in the examinations, and in 1760 he commanded that rhymed poetry be part of the dynastic school curriculum.⁶⁰

Slowly, the Qing court rolled back key elements in the Yuan-Ming examination curriculum.⁶¹ First the discourse, documentary, and legal judgments questions were challenged by reform-minded officials. Then poetry was reconsidered as a proper measure of literati talent. Many Qing traditionalists who favored the "Way learning" orthodoxy looked back to the 1756–1757 reforms favoring poetry as the beginning of a

forty-year process that turned the civil examinations into a trendy contest of literary taste where the most recent fads in classical prose and poetry held sway. The earlier stress on “solid learning” (*shixue*) in the civil examinations, according to Zhang Xuecheng, for example, was displaced.⁶²

Poetry had been the key to the Tang selection process for palace graduates, which privileged it as a genre among literati. After the Tang, both ancient-style poetry (*gushi*) and regulated verse (*lüshi*) lost their privileged positions in civil examinations and literati life. For Qing literati, however, it was precisely its loss of privilege in the Yuan-Ming age of “Way learning” that guaranteed its “aesthetic incorruptibility” from an era that was closer to antiquity and unaffected by the Buddhist infiltration in Song times.⁶³

In 1756, regulated verse in five words and eight rhymes (*wuyan bayun*) was formally reintroduced as a required literary form, which took effect in the 1757 metropolitan examination and was then extended downward to the 1759 provincial examinations.⁶⁴ Initially, the poetry question was added to the second session of examinations, fittingly replacing the documentary and legal judgments questions that had four centuries earlier replaced poetry during the high tide of “Way learning.” In 1758, as Table 8.3 shows, the requirement that literati be examined in regulated verse

Table 8.3. Reformed Format of Provincial and Metropolitan Civil Service Examinations during the Mid-Qing, 1757–1787.

Session No.	No. of Questions
One	
1. Four Books	3 quotations
2. Discourse	1 quotation
Two	
1. <i>Change</i>	4 quotations
2. <i>Documents</i>	4 quotations
3. <i>Poetry</i>	4 quotations
4. <i>Annals</i>	4 quotations
5. <i>Rites</i>	4 quotations
6. <i>Poetry question</i>	1 poetic model
Three	
1. Policy questions	5 essays

was further extended to local qualifying examinations and then to the renewal and licensing examinations in 1760.

To facilitate the transition to the new forms and the rules of prosody, printers increasingly distributed books of rhymes. Young boys (and girls) learned how to balance five- or seven-word lines in regulated verse by referring to poetry primers, which consisted of lessons for matching characters and phrases of varying lengths. Such developments were a clear marker of revival of interest in Tang-Song poetry as a testable measure of cultural attainment. Within ten years, publication and republication of Tang and Song poetry anthologies increased. Other anthologies of “poetry discussions” (*shihua*) from the Ming were reprinted, and Qing scholars compiled several new ones.⁶⁵ Examination reformers began to square off after 1756. Those favoring upgrading the new poetry question vanquished the documentary and legal judgments questions on session two. Those favoring continuing the discourse question successfully moved it to session one. In this struggle, the discourse question became a “Way learning” cause. Ancient Learning scholars favored highlighting Tang poetry because of its pre-Song ties to classical learning; they sought to diminish and ultimately eliminate the discourse question.

What was also fueling the popularity of poetry was the close tie between the rules for rhyming in regulated verse and the growing field of phonology, which became the queen of philology in evidential research during the eighteenth century. Qing evidential scholars framed a research agenda that built on etymology, paleography, and phonology to reconstruct the meaning of Chinese words. One by-product of these philological trends was the full realization of how important poetry, particularly regulated verse, was for the reconstruction of antiquity.⁶⁶

Abrogating Classical Specializations on Examinations

Despite the addition of a poetry question after 1756, Qing classical scholars remained unhappy that examination candidates still mastered the shorter classics, setting the others aside, particularly the *Annals* and *Rituals*. In 1765, for example, the Manchu governor-general in Sichuan memorialized about the specialization distribution on the Classics for the sixty candidates in the Sichuan provincial examination: fourteen

(23 percent) on the *Change*; thirteen (22 percent) on the *Documents*; twenty-one (35 percent) on the *Poetry*; nine (15 percent) on the *Rites* and *Annals*; just three (5 percent) on the Five Classics as a whole. The memorial stressed the continued need to encourage students to specialize on less popular Classics even though the 1756 reforms moved the Five Classics to session two.⁶⁷

The final step in changing the specialization requirement began in 1792, after the last of the Five Classics, the *Annals*, was tested on a revolving basis between 1787 and 1792. This dramatic increase in classical requirements paralleled the increase in competition on Qing examinations (see the late Qing curriculum from 1793 to 1898 outlined in Table 8.4). China's demographic realities, to which the reform of examination requirements was in part addressed, meant that as the civil examinations became more difficult, the odds against passing them because of the increasing number of competing candidates became prohibitive. Only after the Taiping Rebellion did the court consider increasing civil quotas.⁶⁸

From 1793, examiners chose a single quotation from each of the Five Classics for both the provincial and metropolitan examinations, which all candidates answered during the second session. They accepted the Ancient Learning slant of the new stress on the Five Classics and documented how early scholars had mastered all the Classics and not simply

Table 8.4. Reformed Format of Provincial and Metropolitan Civil Service Examinations during the Qing, 1793–1898.

Session No.	No. of Questions
One	
1. Four Books	3 quotations
2. Poetry question	1 poetic model
Two	
1. <i>Change</i>	1 quotation
2. <i>Documents</i>	1 quotation
3. <i>Poetry</i>	1 quotation
4. <i>Annals</i>	1 quotation
5. <i>Rites</i>	1 quotation
Three	
1. Policy questions	5 essays

specialized on one of them. By 1787, the place of “Way learning” in civil examinations was often controversial.⁶⁹

Ancient Learning advocates were still not completely satisfied. Qian Daxin recommended in his private writings that the Four Books—not the Five Classics—be moved back to session two, giving the Five Classics priority on session one. After four centuries of use, Qian contended, there were essays on every possible quotation in the Four Books an examiner might choose.⁷⁰ Consequently, candidates could read such essays, which were widely printed, and avoid reading the Four Books themselves. The Five Classics were too long and difficult for the same thing to happen to them, Qian maintained. Similarly, in a memorial to the emperor, the Changzhou evidential scholar Sun Xingyan (1753–1818) called for adding Han commentaries and Tang subcommentaries to the Qing examination curriculum to supplement the Song commentaries included in the early Ming trilogy of orthodox scholia (see Chapter 1). Neither request was acted upon.⁷¹

In one area, however, the Ancient Learning group in Beijing was able to change the examination curriculum with surprising ease, when in 1792, Ji Yun, then a minister of rites, requested abandoning Hu Anguo’s Song Learning commentary to the *Springs and Autumns* annals in the examination curriculum (see Chapter 7). Ji Yun’s victory was incomplete, however. The Ancient Learning challenge to the Four Books had been successful in authorizing the Five Classics for all candidates, but the Four Books monopoly on the highest ranks in the local, provincial, and metropolitan civil examinations was maintained. Indeed, the examiners’ tendency to grade each of the candidate’s five essays on the Classics uniformly undermined their significance individually in the rankings. Such essays, as in the case of Qing examination essays on the Four Books, were evaluated as a group. Nevertheless, the court’s penchant for classical compromise had enabled the Qianlong reforms to take hold successfully within the bureaucracy and mollify its advocates of Song versus Han dynasty classicism.

The Jiaqing (r. 1796–1820) and Daoguang (r. 1820–1850) courts by comparison were less interested in the civil examination curriculum. Instead the Jiaqing emperor in particular focused on procedural problems.⁷² Rather than the ruler taking the lead, as Yongzheng and Qianlong

had done (see Chapter 6), increasingly militant literati associated with the statecraft movement led the way in retracing debates associated with the examination system. The Qianlong emperor had succeeded in staying ahead of literati opinion concerning civil examinations, but his successors, when confronted with vocal literati opinion, were satisfied with maintaining the logistics of the system in place. Both the Jiaqing and Daoguang courts emphasized nitty-gritty responses to specific irregularities in the selection process, such as selection of quotations, grading, and what to do with failed examination papers. Although they recognized that an important aspect of the civil examinations was the periodic questioning of the system from within that gave it credibility from without, they let the literati take the lead on such questions.⁷³

Calls for Examination Reform in the Early Nineteenth Century

Given the logistical nightmare outlined in Chapter 6, the Jiaqing and Daoguang courts focused on keeping the civil examinations running on schedule, no small feat in itself. The Qianlong emperor had bequeathed a top-down reformist policy, but his successors in the early nineteenth century sought to ameliorate the increasing corruption in the examination compounds by facing up to it as reality and rationalizing it into a virtue. The imperial court saw the insatiable desire for civil degrees as a unique opportunity for fund-raising to pay for wars and other emergencies.⁷⁴ Jiaqing and Daoguang were less concerned with improving classical studies than they were in lessening the political and legal pressures on the licentiates and candidates. Many literati were caught up in a more vocal Han versus Song Learning debate, and some called for a comprehensive classical synthesis of the two poles of classical studies. Many proposed turning Han classicism and Song theory into complementary standards for policy questions on the civil examinations. No changes in curriculum were entertained until the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), however.⁷⁵

Liang Zhangju's famous *Collected Comments on the Crafting of 8-Legged Civil Examination Essays* influenced early nineteenth-century literati opinion because it presented many telling primary sources on the Ming-Qing selection process.⁷⁶ Liang's entries were later spread more widely in Xu Ke's early Republican-era *Classified Jottings on Qing Dy-*

nasty Unofficial History. Such painstaking accounts of actual examination experiences presented Qing literati and Republican intelligentsia with the harsh realities of the examination compounds (fires, riots, etc.) and the arbitrariness of many examiners.⁷⁷ Chen Shouqi (1771–1834), a Fujian champion of Han Learning, prepared an influential essay entitled “On the Civil Examinations” (*Keju lun*), in which he blasted the impractical focus of the curriculum. Citing Zhu Xi and the late Ming writer Gui Youguang (1506–1571) for precedents, Chen recounted how generations of literati had buried themselves in literary pursuits for careerist goals. For a millennium, the error had been to link civil service selection to literary talent. But Chen made no mention of such misgivings in his “Afterword” for the 1804 Guangdong or 1807 Henan provincial examinations he supervised, nor did he publicly recommend major reforms.⁷⁸

Other early nineteenth-century activists such as Bao Shichen (1775–1855), Gong Zizhen (1792–1841), and Wei Yuan (1794–1856) contended that more activist statecraft initiatives were required if the Qing government hoped to cope with its administrative decline.⁷⁹ They included criticism of the role the civil examinations played in creating a sterile academic environment in which literati paid little attention to the actual problems facing the dynasty. A poor scholar who unsuccessfully competed for palace-degree status thirteen times and eventually settled for a provincial degree, Bao Shichen noted that the examination system was supposed to attract men of talent to government service. Instead, it stressed literary and classical erudition of dubious use. In his private writings, Bao called for changes that would drop the 8-legged essay and emphasize practical affairs tested by policy questions.⁸⁰

Also unsuccessful in the metropolitan examinations, Gong Zizhen blamed the pettiness of the selection process for his failures. Wei Yuan, like Gong, was a follower initially of Changzhou traditions of anti-Heshen dissent articulated through the Gongyang Commentary to the *Springs and Autumns* annals (see Chapter 7). He received the palace degree at the late age of fifty and complained privately that the civil service lacked men with practical talents like him because the selection process did not stress administrative concerns. Literature and classicism were the pillars of literati life, but these were of limited help when the dynasty faced unprecedented threats to its governing capacities.⁸¹

Despite such dissatisfactions, the Daoguang court made no move in the 1820s to build on earlier reforms now that the Heshen era was behind it. For example, an 1835 memorial by an imperial censor asking that legal expertise be tested regularly as one of the five policy questions was not enacted, although policy questions on the penal code sometimes appeared on provincial and metropolitan examinations.⁸² As the Qing dynasty lost the initiative to reform the civil selection curriculum in the early nineteenth century, statecraft scholars such as Bao Shichen and Wei Yuan turned to other institutional questions, including the economy, the grain trade, and the Yellow River Conservancy.⁸³ Others, such as the future leader of the Taiping Rebellion, Hong Xiuquan (1814–1864), bereft of hope in the examination market, took more radical positions than mere reform and as a minority Hakka Chinese called for overthrow of the Manchu Qing dynasty.

The Taipings and New Examinations, 1850–1865

During the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), local and provincial examinations under Qing auspices in many provinces were brought to a halt. In Hunan, for example, officials loyal to the Manchus asked as early as 1852 that the provincial examinations be postponed because of the Taiping military threat.⁸⁴ Particularly hard hit, because the Taiping rebels made Nanjing their capital, Yangzi delta provinces ceased civil examinations in 1859. Candidates from Jiangsu province were asked to travel to Zhejiang for Qing provincial examinations, while Anhui students took the examinations in unaffected areas of the province. In Hangzhou, the capital of Zhejiang, local examinations were stopped for three cycles in 1860 and not resumed until 1865. Local examinations there were not fully back on track until 1869. The Yangzi delta had dominated imperial examinations since the Ming dynasty, but after the devastation of the Taiping Rebellion, sons of Yangzi delta families were no longer unchallenged in the empire-wide examination competition. Provinces such as Hunan in the central Yangzi and Guangdong in the Southeast increasingly placed their candidates among metropolitan graduates.

An important clue to the local importance of examinations, however, is that areas under Taiping control held civil and military examinations

devised by the new rulers and supervised by military officials assigned to govern local areas.⁸⁵ Hong Xiuquan and his top leaders, many of whom had failed to enter the Qing civil service, recognized the importance of civil examinations for augmenting Taiping political legitimacy and for opening the doors of officialdom to local literati.⁸⁶ From 1851 to 1853, the Taipings initiated local, provincial, and capital examinations that included a number of changes from the Qing versions. There were no quotas for the Taiping examinations, for example, and the likelihood of passing was considerably higher. Nor were candidates asked to report their family backgrounds in applications. In an 1854 Hubei examination under the Taipings, over 800 of the 1,000 candidates passed; compare this with the normal passing rate of 1–5 percent for Qing provincial examinations. Moreover, the Taipings held yearly metropolitan examinations, in contrast to the Qing, whose metropolitan exams were triennial, presumably to replace local Qing officials with enough of their own.⁸⁷

According to some sources, women for the first time took special civil examinations, which if true would have been unprecedented.⁸⁸ But they are not mentioned in most Taiping sources, and the examination that women were alleged to have taken was at a high level that should have presupposed lower examinations, for which there are no records. Nevertheless, the Taipings augmented education for women.⁸⁹ At first Hong Xiuquan was not sure what format the curriculum should follow. He sent an imperial decree to the chief examiner for the special examination to celebrate Hong's birthday in which he sought the examiner's advice:

The selection of officials through examinations is beset with dangers, and it has never pleased me. Now at the beginning of the establishment of the dynasty, there are a hundred things to be done. Apparently the only way to cope with the situation is to select as many men of learning as possible to do the job. This is the reason for taking the occasion of my birthday to give this examination as a temporary measure. However, the *Analects* and *Mencius* should most certainly not be used, because of the fact that the doctrines contained in them are contrary to our sacred teachings. Do you have any good way to handle this situation?⁹⁰

The examiner recommended Hong Xiuquan's "Heavenly Commandments" (*Tiantiao shu*) and other Taiping religious decrees for the special examination, which pleased the "Heavenly King." This solution mimicked Ming Taizu's *Sacred Edict in Six Maxims* (*Shengyu liuyan*), which Ming emperors had required on the civil examinations.⁹¹ Hong Xiuquan's maxims supplanted the Kangxi emperor's 1670 *Sacred Edict* and the Yongzheng emperor's 1724 *Amplified Instructions for the Sacred Edict*, which Qing licentiates memorized for licensing examinations.⁹²

Christian "Classics" to legitimate the Taipings paralleled earlier uses of "Way learning" and the Five Classics to uphold Ming and Qing rulers. The Four Books and Five Classics, for example, were replaced on the Taiping examination curriculum by Chinese versions of the Old and New Testaments of the Judeo-Christian Bible, as well as Taiping texts attributed to Hong Xiuquan. For example, the "Eastern King" of the Taipings, Yang Xiuqing (d. 1856), set the following quotation for the discourse question in 1853: "Is the true Way the same as the worldly Way?" The quotation for the literary essay was "God is the great parent of all countries. He has produced and nourished all people." And the poetry question that Yang set was clearly an effort to claim political legitimacy for himself: "Everywhere within the four seas there is the Eastern King."⁹³

Although the Bible was translated into a semicolloquial form, the literary and institutional forms of Taiping examinations were nevertheless consistent with Ming and Qing examinations. Taiping candidates were still expected to write essays using the 8-legged essay grid on the biblical quotations selected by the examiners. In addition, answers to poetry questions followed the same standard Qing rhyming requirements initiated in 1756, that is, Tang dynasty-style regulated verse. A single policy question was usually also required, with a minimum answer of 300 characters.⁹⁴ Form did not concern Hong Xiuquan as much as content. Long-standing stylistic requirements for essay, poetry, and policy questions and their division into separate testing sessions, whether Qing or Taiping, were not irrevocably wedded to the classical curriculum but had a cultural life of their own.⁹⁵

A Taiping quotation on the ruler's "true spirit" (*zhenshen*) for an 8-legged examination essay effectively legitimated Hong Xiuquan in

ways parallel to earlier efforts to use the “Way leaning” notion of the pure “mind of the Way” to legitimate Ming and Qing rulers (see Chapter 1). Some candidates in the Yangzi delta had little trouble passing both Taiping and Qing civil examinations. In fact, some scholars afterward were accused by the Qing of supporting the Taipings. Wang Tao (1828–1897), a translator and collaborator in Hong Kong and Scotland in the 1860s with James Legge in the translation of the Chinese Classics into English, was accused of using an alias as the *optimus* on a Taiping palace examination, although such claims have been refuted. Wang did, however, support the Taiping governor of Suzhou and later was protected from arrest by the British in Shanghai when Qing authorities sought him as a traitor.⁹⁶

Political reforms initiated by Hong Ren’gan (1822–1864) beginning in 1859 adjusted the Taiping civil and military examinations, despite changes in nomenclature, to correspond more closely to Qing models.⁹⁷ In 1861 Taiping regulations concerning recruitment of literati, Hong Ren’gan and others established triennial provincial and metropolitan examinations, although they dropped the privilege earlier provincial graduates who failed the metropolitan examination had enjoyed since the Ming dynasty, namely, not having to repeat the provincial tests before they could compete for the palace degree again. This meant that provincial graduates under the Taipings could not constitute a separate status group (see Chapter 3).⁹⁸

In addition, Hong Ren’gan’s new regulations stressed that morality and talent went hand in hand in the selection process. To this end, the Taipings now permitted quotations from Confucius’s *Analects* and the *Mencius* as the basis for candidates’ essays. Taiping authorities prepared revised versions of the Four Books and Five Classics to complement earlier Christian texts. Although Hong Ren’gan was critical of 8-legged essays, they remained the literary form for the Taiping examinations until the Heavenly Kingdom was eradicated in 1864.⁹⁹ What we can see in such efforts is that the examination regime could and did serve the educational purposes of different dynasties and different ideologies over time, from belles lettres during the Tang and Song, “Way learning” in the Ming and Qing, to Taiping Christianity in the 1860s.

Late Qing Examinations and the Boxer Fiasco, 1865–1905

In the aftermath of the bloody defeat of the Taipings, a weakened Qing dynasty and its literati-officials faced up to the new educational requirements the civil service would have to fulfill to survive in a world increasingly filled with menacing industrializing nations. Where the Opium War (1839–1842) had not provoked any important calls for introduction of “Western learning” into the civil service curriculum, the situation after the fall of the Taipings was remarkably different. After 1865, Western schools and Japanese education policies served literati reformers as concrete models for delivering changes that would by 1905 unceremoniously replace the prestigious civil service examinations.

Reforms initiated in the post-Taiping era failed to stem the tide of Qing decline, however. Many thought efforts to achieve “wealth and power” through “self-strengthening” were insufficient because the overall educational system undergirding the civil examinations had not been properly addressed after 1865. One of the four chief examiners for the 1890 metropolitan examination, on which the future chancellor of Beijing University, Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940), finished eighty-first, referred to Gu Yanwu’s attack on the 8-legged essay but defended its use. But the genre was under severe attack by candidates such as Cai.¹⁰⁰ In a 1934 reminiscence of his early education in the 1870s and 1880s, Cai Yuanpei wrote that the 8-legged essay of his time had already been curtailed to “six legs” (*lingu*). He poked fun at it as an out-of-date form of writing that at age seventeen he quickly discarded in favor of evidential research and literary works.¹⁰¹

Yan Fu (1853–1921), whose poor prospects in the civil examination system caused him to enter the School of Navigation of the Fuzhou Shipyard in 1866, expressed long pent-up bitterness toward the civil examinations and the 8-legged essay when he became a publicist and prepared articles for the reformist press that emerged after 1895. Since 1885, Yan had failed the provincial examinations four times.¹⁰² Many like Yan began in the 1890s to follow the lead of the Christian missionaries and to link the weakness of the Qing to the 8-legged examination essay, which allegedly was wasting the minds of the current generation. Moreover, Yan and other reformist voices associated the power of the West with

modern schools in industry, arsenals, and shipyards, where students were trained in modern subjects requiring practical training. Where earlier reformers had suggested getting rid of civil examinations and replacing them with Han dynasty-style recommendation procedures, late Qing reformers began to offer schools instead of examinations as the panacea for China's ills.¹⁰³

For Yan Fu and the reformers in the 1890s, Western schools and Westernized Japanese education were examples that the Qing dynasty must emulate. The extension of mass schooling within a standardized classroom system and homogeneous or equalized groupings of students seemed to promise a way out of the quagmire of the imperial examination regime, whose educational efficiency was by the 1890s suspect. Uncritical presentations of Western schools and Japanese education as success stories were widely accepted.¹⁰⁴ Such calls for Western-style schools usually failed to address the classical versus vernacular language problem in any contemplated program for education and examination reform.¹⁰⁵

Delegitimation and Decanonization

By 1895, after the Qing dynasty had lost the Sino-Japanese War, it faced a bleak political future. Those involved with the 1898 Reform Movement contended that political reform required fundamental educational change, and educational change was possible only if the civil examinations were transformed.¹⁰⁶ The march toward the delegitimation of the civil examination curriculum, as seen from the standpoint of the Qing dynasty, began in earnest during the spring of 1895 metropolitan examinations, the first after the Sino-Japanese War. Kang Youwei, then a candidate for the palace degree, was in Beijing that spring. He and his Cantonese followers challenged the candidates for the metropolitan examination to provoke the court to adopt a more activist response during the postwar crisis.¹⁰⁷

After Kang finished fifth on the 1895 metropolitan examination and fifty-first overall on the palace examination, he offered the Guangxu emperor (r. 1875–1908) a vision of reform in which modifications of the civil examinations were a high priority. All of the examination reform proposals, however, built on ideas presented earlier (see Chapters 6 and 7), which various imperial courts had not heeded.¹⁰⁸ Subsequently, the 1898 Reforms

were never carried out, and the coup d'état that restored the empress dowager to power sent many reformers into exile. From 1898 until 1900, civil examinations in counties, townships, prefectures, provinces, and the capital went on as they always had. In fact, not even the metropolitan examination in the spring of 1898 was affected by the reformers.¹⁰⁹

When reforms that had been called for since the late Ming were finally promulgated in the late nineteenth century, however, they were both too early, for there was nothing comparable to replace the civil examinations with, and too late, because the changes could not keep pace with the demands of the times. It took six years of debate and controversy before the civil examinations were unceremoniously dropped in 1905 by the very men who had short-circuited the reforms of 1898. In another seven years the dynasty itself collapsed as well.

The demise of civil examinations and rise of modern schools in China were more complicated than just the demise of imperial examinations and the rise of modern education, which would subordinate examinations to schooling. A social, political, and cultural nexus of classical literati values, dynastic imperial power, and elite gentry status unraveled.¹¹⁰ Remarkably, the Qing bureaucracy, unwittingly, became a party to its own delegitimation. By first decanonizing the content of civil examinations, a process that began in the eighteenth century with the Ancient Learning attack on Cheng-Zhu "Way learning" and continued under the Taipings, late nineteenth-century literati hoped to free themselves from the imperatives of the sterile "examination life" of their predecessors. From the dynasty's point of view, however, if civil examinations survived even in a decanonized form, they would still be an avenue for candidates—and there were still millions of them—to march obediently into the examination compounds to the drums of the dynasty. The success of Taiping examinations that drew on questions from the Christian Bible demonstrated this logic.¹¹¹

During the chaos of the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, however, the Qing court under the empress dowager forgot the lessons that earlier Manchu emperors had been taught. The delegitimation of the civil examinations, once complete, had consequences that went beyond what the court and many literati expected.¹¹² The final race to deconstruct the old and es-

tablish new institutions was a consequence of the occupation of the capital by Western and Japanese troops in 1900. The Boxer popular rebellion and the response of the Western powers and Japan to it had unbalanced the power structure in the capital so much that foreigners were able to put considerable pressure on provincial and national leaders. Foreign support of reform thus strengthened the political fortunes of provincial reformers such as Yuan Shikai (1859–1916) and Zhang Zhidong (1837–1909), who opposed the Boxers. The empress dowager was dependent on Yuan after the Boxer debacle because of his expertise in dealing with the foreign powers in Beijing and because he controlled the Northern (Beiyang) Army.¹¹³

The Early Promise of Post-Boxer Examinations

The 1900 Boxer Rebellion produced a general dislocation in all aspects of governance in north China, including the 1900–1901 civil examinations, which was exacerbated by the foreign occupation of Beijing.¹¹⁴ The issue of education reform again came up in January 1901, when the court was in refuge in Xian. It sent out an urgent plea asking all high officials to submit proposals for reform.¹¹⁵ Then serving as Huguang governor-general, Zhang Zhidong took this opportunity in July 1901 to submit a memorial coauthored with the Jiangnan governor-general, Liu Kunyi (1830–1902), both of whom had opposed the court's ill-fated alliance with the Boxers. They strongly encouraged overhaul of the content of the civil examinations and outlined a school system modeled after Japanese elementary, middle, and higher education.¹¹⁶

In addition, Zhang and Liu urged the court to integrate schools with the examination system, which they saw as the first step toward the eventual elimination of the latter in ten years. Official quotas for degrees would favor school graduates for dynastic positions, not examination graduates. All private and official academies, they suggested, should be turned into new schools as soon as possible. They also advocated abolition of all military examinations and strongly urged sending students abroad to study. Most of the details of the reforms had been argued for centuries, and the 1898 reformers had unsuccessfully tried to put most of them in effect as a package of changes.¹¹⁷

Table 8.5. Format of Provincial and Metropolitan Civil Service Examinations during the Late Qing Dynasty, after the 1901 Reform (Abolished in 1905).

Session No.	No. of Questions
One	
1. Discourses on the history of Chinese politics	5 essays
Two	
1. Policy questions on world politics	5 essays
Three	
1. Four Books	2 essays
2. Five Classics	1 essay

Note: The requirement that all candidates specialize on one of the Five Classics was dropped in 1787. In addition, such essays no longer had to follow the “8-legged” style.

In August 1901, for the first time since 1664–1667, the abolition of 8-legged essays was approved by the court and obeyed by the Ministry of Rites. Local examiners could now expect local candidates on both licensing and qualifying examinations to answer questions dealing with both Chinese and Western learning. In addition, the format of the provincial and metropolitan civil examinations after 1901, as shown in Table 8.5, emphasized discourse essays and policy questions on the first and second sessions.¹¹⁸

Session one expected candidates to answer five discourse questions dealing with Chinese institutions and politics. Session two included five policy questions on Western institutions and politics. The last session required three classical essays, two on quotations from the Four Books and one from the Five Classics. In theory, all three sessions were expected to count equally for the final rankings, but how this would work out in practice remained unknown.¹¹⁹

In 1903 the first civil examinations since enactment of the reforms took place in Kaifeng, the capital of Henan province, because the provincial examination hall in Shuntian, where the Beijing metropolitan examinations were held, was burned down by the foreign troops sent in to relieve the Boxer siege of the international legations. The Kaifeng metropolitan examiners presented five discourse questions on session one on the following topics: (1) Guanzi’s Zhou dynasty military policies; (2) Emperor Wen of the Han (r. 179–156 BCE) and his policies toward Nanyue

(southern territories); (3) imperial use of laws; (4) evaluation procedures for officials; and (5) Liu Guanzu's (1142–1222) proposals for stabilizing the Southern Song dynasty. On session two, the five policy questions were on (1) the Western stress on travel to study, as articulated by Adam Smith; (2) the Japanese use of Western models for educational institutions; (3) the banking policies of various countries; (4) the police and laws; and (5) the industrial basis of wealth and power. For session three, three passages, one each from the *Analects*, *Great Learning*, and *Change Classic*, were chosen for essays.¹²⁰

The reforms seem to have been relatively effective, even though the 1903 classical essays on session three resembled the tight format of an 8-legged essay.¹²¹ What was peculiar, however, was that the examiners appointed by the Ministry of Rites and Hanlin Academy presented their final evaluations in the traditional order. That is, they first presented the outstanding essays on the Four Books and the Five Classics, without even mentioning that this was the third session. Next they presented the discourse answers, even though these were on session one. The best policy answers were included at the end, as if they were still session three.

Despite the revised order in which the examination of 1903 had been given, following the imperial reforms decreed in 1901, the examiners persisted in reporting the results in terms of the traditional order: classical essay, discourse essay, and policy question. Consequently, the examiners betrayed in practice what they accepted in theory, namely, the new format for the civil examinations. We should not make too much of this procedural caveat, however, because the examiners' "local resistance" could not undo what the reformers had wanted, namely, to fundamentally change the future direction of the civil examinations.¹²² Overall, the graduates of these new examinations stressed that "Chinese learning" needed to be buttressed by Western learning to become complete. Understandably perhaps, the examiners felt more at ease with final rankings that stressed the classical essays.¹²³

Even if the post-Boxer examination reforms could not accomplish in the short run all their goals, the overall scope of the examinations became decidedly more institutional and international in focus.¹²⁴ Examiners' biases toward "Chinese learning" influenced many of these fields,

but taken as a whole new directions in scholarship and learning were still included in the balanced appraisals of China vis-à-vis Japan or the West. The 1903 catalog of policy questions used in the civil examinations thereafter identified thirty-two major categories:¹²⁵

- | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Way of ordering | 17. Mathematics |
| 2. Scholarship | 18. Sciences (I) |
| 3. Domestic government | 19. Sciences (II) |
| 4. Foreign relations | 20. State finance |
| 5. Current affairs | 21. Monetary system |
| 6. Civil examinations | 22. Military system (I) |
| 7. Schools | 23. Military system (II) |
| 8. Official institutions | 24. Defense matters |
| 9. Assemblies | 25. Agriculture system (I) |
| 10. State organization | 26. Agriculture system (II) |
| 11. Public laws | 27. Public works |
| 12. Penal laws | 28. Commercial system |
| 13. Education affairs | 29. Roads and mines |
| 14. Astronomy | 30. Topography |
| 15. Geography | 31. History |
| 16. Calendrical studies | 32. Foreign history |

Questions and answers concerning reforming the civil examinations, number 6 above, for example, confirmed the reformers' view that policy and discourse questions should take precedence over classical essays and that schools should take precedence over examinations. The rise of "Chinese learning" as a counterpart to "Western learning" in the new policy essays, moreover, indicated that the divisive nineteenth-century dichotomy between Han and Song Learning had been translated into a new form of native studies that amalgamated both under the banner of "Chinese learning." The English translation that resulted from this linguistic change was "sinology," which became the standard term for referring to a "sinologist" as a "China specialist."¹²⁶

Given the difficulties in establishing schools after 1903, however, and the reluctance of many to break the examination system's monopoly on awarding degrees, the idealistic argument that schools and examina-

tions could complement each other had to be reassessed. Officials now were convinced that earlier reformers circa 1896–1898 had been right when they had contended that new schools would never develop very far or receive popular support as long as civil examinations monopolized higher degrees.¹²⁷

Zhang Zhidong and Yuan Shikai, then court officials involved in military and educational reform, proposed early in 1903 that degree quotas for examinations should be gradually reduced in favor of school degrees as the basis for civil appointments. Otherwise most degree candidates would continue to choose the examination path over schools as the best way to status and public esteem. They cited as a precedent for such action a 1744 Qianlong edict that had ordered provincial quotas to be dropped. Critics quickly pointed out that the emperor had wanted only to reform the civil examinations, not abolish them, and called for Zhang's and Yuan's impeachment for their audacity. Although temporarily tabled due to the impeachment charges, the Zhang and Yuan memorial admitted that getting rid of the 8-legged essay had not been the panacea everyone had expected: "Even though the 8-legged essay has been abolished and replaced by essays on current policies and classical principles, yet, after all, one's writings are based on the strength of one day and these empty words cannot be compared with actual achievements."¹²⁸

Even policy essays were soon presented as empty exercises in formal rhetoric, something that Su Shi (1037–1101), living in Northern Song times, had already contended. The strengths of the civil examinations, which ensured the court's cultural control over its elites, and the "natural" constituency for the examinations who numbered over four million were forgotten. School degrees became the new remedy for the production of government officials for dynastic service.¹²⁹ A Committee on Education was established in 1903, which later in 1904 presented the throne with new policies to replace examinations with schools as the road to officialdom. This proposal became known as the "Memorial requesting the gradual reduction of the civil examinations as an experiment and that stress be placed on new schools." Still facing conservative opposition, however, the full abrogation of the examinations was put off until 1912, when the school system presumably would be in place, but the quotas for all examinations from 1906 on would be reduced by one-third.¹³⁰

A powerful consensus emerged that, in Chang's and Yuan's words, "unless schools are established there will be no way to bring forward men of ability to avert the dangers of these times." In the midst of crisis, many high officials now saw civil examinations as the fundamental problem preventing further educational reform rather than the institutional means to control literati elites that earlier rulers had perceived. The imperial edict of January 13, 1904, agreed with the new view: "Present conditions are very difficult. The improving of learning and the training of men of ability are pressing tasks." The original memorial was presented in the inaugural 1904 issue of Shanghai Commercial Press's *Eastern Miscellany* (*Dongfang zazhi*), which made the case even more compelling for those engaged in educational reform.

Shu Xincheng (1892–1960), then an editor for the *Sea of Words* (*Cihai*) dictionary for the Commercial Press in Shanghai and later a distinguished republican educator, recalled the pressure of the times for drastic change:

The changeover to a new system of education at the end of the Qing appeared on the surface to be a voluntary move by educational circles, but in reality what happened was that foreign relations and domestic pressures were everywhere running up against dead ends. Unless reforms were undertaken, China would have no basis for survival. Education simply happened to be caught up in a situation in which there was no choice.¹³¹

An article in the eighth issue of *Eastern Miscellany* in 1904, reprinted from a Cantonese daily, contended, for example, that the "examination system as a whole had poisoned the Chinese people for one thousand and several hundred years." The sort of emotional rhetoric that dissenting literati had for centuries directed against the 8-legged essay was now directed by a newly emerging Han Chinese intelligentsia against the reformed civil examinations. Later in 1904, the imperial court issued regulations making schools and school examinations a formal part of the civil examinations by granting such students civil degrees. Gradual transformation of the venerable procedures and institutions of the late imperial

civil examination system into a system of school examinations was by 1904 irrevocable.¹³²

The floodgates broke open wide in 1905, however, in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, which was largely fought on Chinese soil in Manchuria. Given the frantic political climate, the hoary imperial examination system was by 1905 a convenient scapegoat for the war and everything else wrong with China. Now joined by a host of court officials, governor-generals, and governors, Zhang Zhidong and Yuan Shikai submitted a common memorial on August 31, 1905, calling for the immediate abolition of the civil examinations at all levels. Examinations were an insuperable obstacle to new schools, they contended, because civil examination degrees still outweighed in numbers their equivalent school degrees and prevented the ideal of universal education.

The empress dowager quickly approved the memorial on September 2 by issuing an edict that beginning with 1906, all degrees qualifying a student for civil office could be earned only by graduating from the new schools according to the regulations for schools established in 1904. Unexpectedly, the 1903 provincial examinations were the last of their kind; the last metropolitan examination had already been held in 1904; and without warning the 1905 qualifying and licensing examinations were the unheralded finale of a local institution that had lasted over 500 years in its late imperial form.¹³³ Suddenly, millions of local candidates, licentiates, and dynastic school students who had been eligible for government degrees were told to enroll in the new public schools for degrees leading to official appointments. Remarkably, even among the vast number of licentiates, there were few protests, perhaps because many of them expected to become students or teachers in the new education system.¹³⁴

After the civil examinations were abrogated, the Manchus quickly lost one of their most loyal if recalcitrant constituencies, examination candidates. The political consequences of this loss were to be expected when the Qing bureaucracy meekly gave up one of its major weapons of cultural control that for centuries successfully induced literati acceptance of the imperial system. Others have already noted that the post-Boxer reforms were so radical that they helped precipitate the downfall of the dynasty.¹³⁵ What should be added, however, is that the radical reforms

in favor of new schools also failed initially because they could not readily replace public institutions for mobilizing millions of literati in examination compounds that had existed since the early Ming.

Epilogue

Late Imperial Chinese Civilization in Motion

Chinese during the Ming and Qing dynasties were on the move. From 1400 to 1900, they regularly traveled along the waterways and roads of their extensive empire, moving up from villages to counties, townships, prefectures, provinces, and the capital to take the dynasty-wide civil service examinations. Once licensed by a local qualifying examination, candidates traveled far and wide to take regional examinations in the hope that they might move from the bottom up to share political power with the ruler as civil servants. The dynasty legitimated those who successfully passed the examinations to hold office and wield political, cultural, and legal power. Once holding office, they became meritocratically appointed authorities.¹³⁶

Officials who claimed to represent the people while serving in the late imperial bureaucracy were required to have a classical education. That education was premised on long-naturalized social distinctions between literati, peasants, artisans, and merchants in descending order of rank and prestige. Under the Ming dynasty, for example, sons of merchants for the first time were legally permitted to take the civil examinations. The long-standing fear that wealth trumped politics slowly eroded, while Ming authorities increasingly moralized wealth during a “silver age” of unprecedented commercialization, from 1550 to 1650. The remaining occupational prohibitions extended to Buddhist monks, Daoist clerics, and “mean peoples” (those engaged in “unclean” occupations). An unstated gender bias extended to all women and eunuchs.

The classical grounds for seeing meritocratically selected officials as “being appointed in a representative role,” to use Philip Pettit’s terms, were primarily social, favoring the landholding literati rhetorically as properly trained “gentlemen” (*junzi*) and wealthy merchants as successfully “Confucianized” nouveaux riches. The interests of the represented masses were also Confucianized into a rhetoric that told the

public what was acceptable based on a canon drawn from the alleged teachings of Confucius and his disciples. Literati normally cited Mencius: "Heaven sees with the eyes of its people. Heaven hears with the ears of its people." Officials represented the interests of the state only after it tested and appointed them. They could only secondarily and very remotely represent the people at large because no one could be appointed to any office in his home province. The ruler perceived the official who had risen from the bottom up to be his nonelected and self-selected partner in ruling the country through authoritarian political means from the top down, which is why many today find political meritocracy democratically suspect.¹³⁷

What was unique about this effort to develop institutions for classical consensus and political efficacy was its remarkable success in accomplishing the goals for which it was designed, not the democratic goals for which it was not. Education effectively restructured the complex relations between social status, political power, and cultural prestige. A classical education based on nontechnical moral and statecraft theory was as suitable for selection of elites in China to serve the imperial state at its highest echelons of power as humanism and a classical education served elites in the nation-states of early-modern Europe. The examination life, like death and taxes, became one of the fixtures of elite education and popular culture. Examinations represented the focal point through which imperial interests, family strategies, and individual hopes and aspirations were directed. Moreover, the education ethos carried over into the domains of medicine, law, fiscal policy, and military affairs.

Far from being closed, the Ming dynasty was internally the most mobile empire in the early modern world. Already a massive society of some 250 million by 1500, 10 percent of them (some 2.5 million local Chinese) gathered biennially in one of 1,350 Ming counties for the privilege to be locked up inside testing grounds to take civil examinations. Those who passed, some 75,000, registered in one of seventeen provincial capitals to take the heavily policed triennial provincial examinations. The 6,000 who survived that cut then traveled every three years to the capital in Beijing for the dynasty-wide metropolitan and palace examinations for the right to become palace graduates entering officialdom (*jinshi*).

Under an expansive Qing empire, the number of Chinese moving through these regional and hierarchical gates by 1850 doubled to 4.5–5.0 million at the local level. From these, 150,000 survived to take provincial examinations. Civil examinations thus marked one of the most traveled and policed intersections linking late imperial Chinese politics, society, economy, and intellectual life. This book has been about premodern Chinese society and civilization in motion—upward and downward—from 1400 to its Qing dynasty denouement in 1905.

The power of classical learning and statecraft to motivate millions to become public officials serving far from home and family is one part of the story. Only 5 percent would see their hopes realized, however. Success was at a premium. A more important part of the story is about the 95 percent who failed to become officials. The authority of the classical language empowered the civil examinations to gain traction as a cultural gyroscope even in the minds of the millions who failed. More than just the thousands of classically literate officials, the classical knowledge system produced millions of literates who after repeated failures became doctors, Buddhist priests, pettifoggers, teachers, notaries, merchants, and lineage managers, not to mention astronomers, mathematicians, printers, and publishers.

Civil examinations reflected the larger literati culture because state institutions were already penetrated by that culture through a political and social partnership between imperial interests and local elites. Together they had promulgated a classical curriculum of unprecedented scope and magnitude for the selection of officials and the production of classically literate candidates. Both local elites and the imperial court continually influenced the dynastic government to reexamine and adjust the classical curriculum and to entertain new ways to improve the institutional system for selecting civil officials. As a result, civil examinations, as a test of educational merit, tied the dynasty and its elites together bureaucratically via culture. In the realm of culture, however, a broader secret lay hidden.

The state, the ruler, and his ministers were dimly aware that Chinese elites encompassed not only those who passed the final palace examination and became high officials, some 50,000 total for the Ming and Qing dynasties. The fate of the millions of failures, the “lesser lights” in the

classically educated strata of the society, worried the emperors and their courts. Would they become rebels and outlaws and challenge the legitimacy of their rulers? Or would they find suitable social niches for their lives, which a classical education both enabled and encouraged? Emperors also worried when the numbers of old men over eighty taking local examinations went up precipitously. If it was an honor for a grandfather and father, who had failed for decades, to accompany their younger grandson or son into the local examination halls to take the same examination, then why did the court worry about those who continually failed?

One of the conditions for the fluid functioning of the late imperial civil service examinations was the dynasty's attention to its improvement and reform. Past accounts of education and modernization in China have underestimated the degree to which imperial institutions were subjected to internal criticism and reform before Westernization was initiated after 1860. Although many in and outside the bureaucracy viewed the examination road to success as a poor solution, they also admitted that realistically there was no alternative to the regimented process of anonymously examining young men to enter the civil service. Most considered it self-evident that civil examinations were an impartial means for commoners to achieve elite status and wield political power.

Education, Society, and the Civil Service

Civil examinations ended in 1905 and the Qing dynasty collapsed in 1911 before new institutions for elite and popular education enacted in the late nineteenth century could fully take hold. Imperial interests and literati values collapsed together in the twentieth-century Chinese revolution. Increasingly, goals of mass mobilization trumped bureaucratic recruitment. The Qing dynasty, for instance, was complicit in its own dismantling after Chinese reformers unleashed the internal forces of delegitimation that destabilized the Manchu throne. After 1860, radical reforms were initiated to meet the challenges of the Taiping Rebellion and imperialism. The anti-Manchu Taipings instituted a Christian-based civil service, but they stressed mass mobilization more.

During the last years of the Manchu reign, the Chinese civil service lost its precocious luster and became instead an archaic object of ridicule. Civil service reform in East Asia in the twentieth century was tied

to new national goals of Western-style governments and modern economies that superseded classical consensus and dynastic solidarity. The Chinese state became a struggling republic. Despite important continuities, a complete break in the concordance between long-standing, internalized expectations for power, wealth, and prestige, based on a traditional education, and the government's reformed political institutions, based on Western models, occurred in China after 1905.

Despite the accumulated rhetoric of the revolutionaries, premodern Chinese civil examinations overall were not an obstacle to modern state-building. Moreover, classical examinations were an effective cultural, social, political, and educational construction that met the needs of the dynastic bureaucracy while simultaneously supporting late imperial social structure. Gentry and merchant status groups were defined in part by degree credentials. Although the selection process entailed social, political, and cultural reproduction, nevertheless a large pool of examination failures created such a rich array of literary talent that it flowed easily into alternative directions and careers. The archives indicate that peasants, traders, and artisans, who made up 90 percent of the population, were not among those 100 annual or 50,000 Ming-Qing male palace graduates. Nor were they a significant part of about 2.5–4.5 million who over time failed at lower levels every two years.¹³⁸

Occupational fluidity among merchants, military families, and gentry translated into some degree of social circulation for lower and upper elites in the examination market. Usually, however, “commoners” became lower elites before they became degree-holders. When we add to this competition the educational requirement to master classical texts, we can grasp the educational barrier between those licensed to take examinations and those who could not because they were classically illiterate. What others have meant by a “fluid society” or “social mobility” I have described as a modest circulation of lower and upper elites.

When we add the circulation of partially literate nonelites and the lesser lights as the unintended by-products of the civil examination's educational process, we better understand the “meanings of examinations” for the many and not just the few in imperial China.¹³⁹ Pu Songling as a failure many times over immortalized those trapped in the relentless machinery of late imperial civil examinations. We have seen how his

early Qing parody of the examination system revealed the inner tensions that candidates and their families felt.

When the civil examinations were summarily eliminated by modern reformers in 1905, the last dynasty effectively preempted its long-standing partnership with gentry-merchant elites until a new schooling system could be put in place empire-wide. The Manchu dynasty fell in 1911, however. Imperial interests and literati values had been equally served until 1900. They collapsed together in the twentieth-century Chinese revolution.

Revolutionary change continued in China in the 1930s and 1950s first under the Guomindang and then under Communist rule. For both, the civil service was subordinated to a single political party that favored mass mobilization. Many Republican elites from the 1930s failed to convert their newly inherited Westernized statuses into new social and political credentials for their children under the People's Republic of China (PRC). Most were punished for their past prestige under the Republic. A second revolutionary transformation in popular dispositions toward the civil service accompanied the radical change in the conditions of recruitment of public officials under the PRC. In the 1960s and 1970s, the college entry examinations were blamed for the elitism that Mao and his Red Guards feared would overthrow the revolution. Today, party members, like civil servants before them, are again chosen via written examinations, and college students, engineers, and others are encouraged to join the party for careerist interests based on educational merit.¹⁴⁰

Dates of Chinese Dynasties

SHANG: 16th–11th century BCE

ZHOU: 11th century–221 BCE

QIN: 221–207 BCE

HAN: 206 BCE–220 CE

- Former (Western) Han: 206 BCE–8 CE
- Later (Eastern) Han: 25–220

WEI: 220–265

WESTERN JIN: 265–316

SOUTHERN AND NORTHERN DYNASTIES: 386/420–581

- Liu-Song (Southern Dynasty): 420–479
- Northern Wei: 386–534
- Northern Zhou: 557–581

SUI: 581–618

TANG: 618–907

Five Dynasties: 907–960

LIAO: 916–1125

SONG: 960–1280

- Northern Song: 960–1127
- Southern Song: 1127–1280

JIN: 1115–1234

YUAN: 1206/1280–1368

MING: 1368–1644

QING: 1644–1911

Emperors of the Great Ming

(1368–1644)

YEARS OF REIGN	PERSONAL NAME	REIGN TITLE
1368–1398	Zhu Yuanzhang	Hongwu
1399–1402	Zhu Yunwen	Jianwen
1403–1424	Zhu Di	Yongle
1425	Zhu Gaochi	Hongxi
1426–1435	Zhu Zhanji	Xuande
1436–1449, 1457–1464	Zhu Qichen	Zhengtong (also reigned as Tianshun)
1450–1456	Zhu Qiyu	Jingtai
1465–1487	Zhu Jianshen	Chenghua
1488–1505	Zhu Youcheng	Hongzhi
1506–1521	Zhu Houzhao	Zhengde
1522–1566	Zhu Houcong	Jiajing
1567–1572	Zhu Zaihou	Longqing
1573–1620	Zhu Yijun	Wanli
1620	Zhu Changluo	Taichang
1621–1627	Zhu Youjiao	Tianqi
1628–1644	Zhu Youjian	Chongzhen

Emperors of the Great Qing (1644–1911)

YEARS OF REIGN	PERSONAL NAME	REIGN TITLE
1636–1643	Hong Taiji	Chongde (Jin dynasty)
1644–1661	Fulin	Shunzhi
1662–1722	Xuanye	Kangxi
1723–1735	Yinzhen	Yongzheng
1736–1795	Hongli	Qianlong
1796–1820	Yongyan	Jiaqing
1821–1850	Minning	Daoguang
1851–1861	Yizhu	Xianfeng
1862–1874	Zaichun	Tongzhi
1875–1908	Zaitian	Guangxu
1909–1911	Puyi	Xuantong

Abbreviations

CHCELIC	<i>A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China</i> , by Benjamin Elman. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
CPK	<i>Classicism, Politics, and Kinship: The Ch'ang-chou School of New Text Confucianism in Late Imperial China</i> , by Benjamin Elman. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
CT	<i>Changtan</i> [Everyday discussions on the civil examinations], compiled by Tao Fulü. Congshu jicheng chubian. Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1936.
DMB	<i>Dictionary of Ming Biography</i> , 2 vols., ed. L. C. Goodrich et al. New York: Columbia University Press, 1976.
DML	<i>Danmo lu</i> [Record of skilled civil examination papers], in <i>Hanhai</i> [Seas of writings], compiled by Li Tiaoyuan. 1881 collectanea.
ECCP	<i>Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period</i> , ed. Arthur Hummel. Reprint, Taipei: Chengwen Bookstore, 1972.
EPLCC	<i>Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China</i> , by Evelyn Rawski. Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1979.
ESLIC	<i>Education and Society in Late Imperial China</i> , ed. Benjamin Elman and Alexander Woodside. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
ETPLIC	"Educational Theory and Practice in Late Imperial China: The Teaching of Writing as a Specific Case," by Charles Ridley. PhD diss., Stanford University, 1973.
FPP	Elman, <i>From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China</i> . Los Angeles: UCLA Asian Monograph Series, 2001.
GCGJKL	<i>Guochao gongju kaolue</i> [Summary of Qing civil examinations], compiled by Huang Chonglan. 1834 edition.
HCJSWB	<i>Huangchao jingshi wenbian</i> [Collected writings on statecraft from the Qing dynasty], ed. He Changling and compiled by Wei Yuan et al. 1827 and 1873; reprint, Taipei: World Bookstore, 1964.
HCXWXTK	<i>Huangchao xu wenxian tongkao</i> [Comprehensive survey of state documents during the Qing dynasty, continuation], compiled by Liu Jinzao. Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1936.
HJAS	<i>Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies</i>

- HMCH *Huang-Ming ceheng* [Balancing of civil policy examination essays during the Ming dynasty], compiled by Mao Wei. Wuxing, 1605 edition.
- HMGJK *Huang-Ming gongju kao* [Survey of civil examinations during the Ming dynasty], compiled by Zhang Chaorui. Ming Wanli edition.
- HMSYK *Huang-Ming sanyuan kao* [Study of the provincial, metropolitan, and palace civil examination *optimi* during the Ming dynasty], compiled by Chang Hongdao and Chang Ningdao. Late Ming edition, after 1618.
- HMTJJY *Huang-Ming tongji jiyao* [Collection of essentials to the Comprehensive Accounts of the August Ming dynasty], compiled by Chen Jian and appended by Jiang Xuqi. Taipei: Wenhai Press reprint of late Ming edition.
- HMTJSY *Huang-Ming tongji shuyi* [Additions to the Comprehensive Accounts of the August Ming dynasty], compiled by Chen Jian and appended by Bu Shichang and Tu Heng. Taipei: Student Bookstore reprint of 1605 edition.
- HMZYQC *Huang-Ming zhuangyuan quance* [Complete set of policy questions prepared during the Ming dynasty by *optimi* for the palace civil examination], compiled by Jiang Yikui. 1591 edition.
- HQMCZY *Huang-Qing mingchen zouyi* [Memorials of famous officials during the August Qing]. Ca. 1796–1820 edition.
- JAS *Journal of Asian Studies*
- LBTB *Libu tiben* [Memoranda including memorials from the Ministry of Rites]. Ming-Qing Archives, Academia Sinica, Taiwan.
- LBYH *Libu yihui* [Memoranda from the Ministry of Rites]. Ming-Qing Archives, Academia Sinica, Taiwan.
- MDDKLHB *Mingdai dengke lu huibian* [Compendium of Ming dynasty civil and military examination records], 22 vols. Taipei: Xuesheng Bookstore, 1969.
- MDJYLZX *Mingdai jiaoyu lunzhu xuan* [Selection of Ming dynasty writings on education], compiled by Gao Shiliang. Beijing: People's Press, 1990.
- MS *Mingshi* [Ming history]. Taipei: Dingwen Bookstore, 1982.
- MZYTK *Ming zhuangyuan tu kao* [Illustrated survey of *optimi* during the Ming dynasty]. See under ZYTK.
- NCE *Neo-Confucian Education: The Formative Period*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary and John Chaffee. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.
- PCLIC *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. David Johnson, Andrew Nathan, and Evelyn Rawski. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.
- PELC *Pratique des Examens Litteraires en Chine* [Practices of literary examinations in China], compiled by Etienne Zi. Shanghai: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1894.
- QBLC *Qingbai leichao* [Classified jottings on Qing dynasty unofficial history], compiled by Xu Ke. Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1920.
- QDDQHDSL *Qinding Da-Qing huidian shili* [Collected statutes and precedents in the great Qing]. Taipei: Zhonghua Bookstore, 1968.

- QDKCTL *Qinding kechang tiaoli* [Imperially prescribed guidelines for the civil examination grounds]. 1832 edition.
- QDKJKSSL *Qingdai keju kaoshi shulu* [Summary of civil examinations during the Qing period], by Shang Yanliu. Beijing: Sanlian Bookstore, 1958.
- QDMKTL *Qinding moka tiaoli* [Imperially prescribed guidelines for postexamination review of civil examination papers]. Qianlong edition; 1834 edition.
- QDQQJYLZX *Qingdai qianqi jiaoyu lunzhu xuan* [Selections of writings on education from the early Qing period], 3 vols., ed. Li Guojun et al. Beijing: People's Education Press, 1990.
- QMKCYWL *Qian-Ming kechang yiwen lu* [Recording unusual matters heard in the earlier Ming examination grounds]. Guangzhou: Weijing tang shufang edition, Qiantang, 1873 reprint.
- QSG *Qingshi gao* [Draft history of the Qing dynasty], 40 vols., compiled by Zhao Erxun et al. Beijing: Zhonghua Press edition, 1977.
- RZLJS *Rizhi lu jishi* [Collected notes for the record of knowledge gained day by day], by Gu Yanwu. Taipei: Taiwan Commercial Press, 1968.
- SBBY *Sibu beiyao* edition. Shanghai/Taipei: Zhonghua Bookstore, 1979.
- SBCK *Sibu congan* photolithograph editions. Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1920–1922.
- SCC *Science and Civilisation in China*, multivolume, compiled by Joseph Needham et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954–.
- SKQS *Siku quanshu* [Complete collection of the four treasures]. Reprint, Taipei: Commercial Press, 1983–1986.
- SKQSZM *Siku quanshu zongmu* [Catalog of the complete collection of the four treasures], compiled by Ji Yun et al. Taipei: Yiwen Press reprint, 1974.
- TPGTGJKJS *Taiping tianguo keju kaoshi jilue* [Survey of civil examinations under the Taipings Heavenly Kingdom], by Shang Yanliu. Beijing: Zhonghua Bookstore, 1961.
- TXTML *Tong-Xiang timing lu* [Record of civil service graduates in Tongzhou and Jingxiang], compiled by Li Yunhui. 1895 edition.
- WXTK *Wenxian tongkao* [Comprehensive analysis of civil institutions], compiled by Ma Duanlin. Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1936.
- XWXTK *Xu wenxian tongkao* [Comprehensive analysis of civil institutions, continuation], compiled by Wang Qi, in *Shitong* (Ten comprehensive encyclopedias). Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1936.
- YS *Yuanshi* [History of the Yuan dynasty]. Taipei: Dingwen Press, 1982.
- ZYC *Zhuangyuan ce* [Policy answers of *optimi*], compiled by Jiao Hong and Wu Daonan. Late Ming edition.
Zhuangyuan ce, compiled by Jiao Hong and Wu Daona. 1733 *Huaide tang* edition.
- ZYCH *Zhiyi conghua* [Collected comments on the crafting of 8-legged civil examination essays], compiled by Liang Zhangju (1775–1849). Taipei: Guangwen Bookstore, 1976, reprint of 1859 edition.

- ZYKSJ *Zhiyi kesuo ji* [Collection of fragments about crafted 8-legged essays for civil examinations], compiled by Li Diaoyuan (1734–1803). Congshu jicheng chubian. Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1936.
- ZYTK *Zhuangyuan tukao* [Illustrated survey of *optimi* (during the Ming dynasty)], compiled by Gu Zuxun and Wu Cheng'en. 1607 edition. Also called *Ming zhuangyuan tu kao* [Illustrated survey of *optimi* during the Ming dynasty].

Notes

Introduction

1. Cf. Wm. Theodore de Bary, *The Liberal Tradition in China* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1983); and Peter Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008).
2. Evelyn Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979); and Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
3. Wolfgang Franke, *The Reform and Abolition of the Traditional Chinese Examination System* (Cambridge, MA: Center for East Asian Studies, Harvard University Press, 1960); and Ts'e-tsung Chow, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).
4. Etienne Zi, *Pratiques des Examens litteraires en Chine* [Practices of the literary examinations in China] (Shanghai: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1894). The Four Books included (1) *Analects*, (2) *Great Learning*, (3) *Mencius*, and (4) *Doctrine of the Mean*. The Five Classics were (1) *Change*, (2) *Poetry*, (3) *Documents*, (4) *Springs and Autumns annals*, and (5) *Rituals*.
5. For the global context of classical learning, 1500–1800, see Peter Miller, “Comparing Antiquarianisms: A View from Europe,” in *Antiquarianism and Intellectual Life in Europe and China, 1500–1800*, ed. Peter Miller and François Louis (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 103–145.
6. Bai Xinliang, *Zhongguo gudai shuyuan fazhan shi* [A history of academy development in ancient China] (Tianjin: Tianjin daxue chubanshe, 1995); and Benjamin A. Elman, “Imperial Politics and Confucian Societies in Late Imperial China: The Hanlin and Donglin Academies,” *Modern China* 15, no. 4 (October 1989): 379–418.
7. The University of London was established in 1838 to act as an examining body for its colleges and other approved institutions. It acted solely in this capacity until 1858, when it became a teaching university. See Negley Harte, *The University of London, 1836–1986* (London: Athlone Press, 1986).

1. Ming Imperial Power, Cultural Politics, and Civil Examinations

1. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998). I will refer to local Chinese landed gentry elites whose cultural roles were paramount as “literati” or as “scholar-officials” if they were prominent in government.
2. Cf. F. W. Mote, “The Growth of Chinese Despotism,” *Oriens Extremus* 8, no. 1 (August 1961): 1–41; and Wm. Theodore de Bary, *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 158–168.
3. Cf. Ying-shih Yü (Yu Yingshi), *Zhu Xi de lishi shijie* [Zhu Xi’s historical world] (Taipei: Yunchen wenhua shiye gufen youxian gongsi, 2003); and Peter Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008). See Elman, “The Failures of Contemporary Chinese Intellectual History,” *Eighteenth Century Studies* 43, no. 3 (Spring 2010): 371–391.
4. Peter Bol, “*This Culture of Ours*”: *Intellectual Transitions in T’ang and Sung China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), ably discusses the main choices among literati to rejuvenate Song China.
5. Jesse Sloane, “Contending States and Religious Orders in North China and in East Asian Context, 906–1260” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2010), chapter 1.
6. Zhu Yuanzhang changed Wuzhou’s name back to its earlier name, first to Ningyue in 1358 and then to Jinhua in 1360, to celebrate his defeat of Yuan forces. See *Jinhua fuzhi* [Prefectural gazetteer of Jinhua] (1480 edition) (reprint, Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1965), Shang Lu’s preface, 1a; see also 1.3a–b.
7. Conrad Schirokauer, “Neo-Confucians under Attack: The Condemnation of (*Wei-hsueh*),” in *Crisis and Prosperity in Sung China*, ed. John Haeger (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975), 163–196; and Peter Bol, “The Rise of Local History: History, Geography, and Culture in Southern Song and Yuan Wuzhou,” *HJAS* 61, no. 1 (2001): 37–76.
8. CHCELIC, 56–57.
9. Araki Toshikazu, *Sōdai kakyo seido kenkyū* [Study of the Song dynasty civil service examination system] (Kyoto: Dobosha Press, 1969), 450–461. See Robert Hymes, “Not Quite Gentlemen? Doctors in Song and Yuan,” *Chinese Science* 7 (1986): 11–85; and Stephen West, “Mongol Influence on the Development of Northern Drama,” in *China under Mongol Rule*, ed. John Langlois Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 435–442.
10. Schirokauer, “Neo-Confucians under Attack,” 163–196.
11. YS, 81.2015–2022. Cf. Peter Bol, “Examinations and Orthodoxies: 1070 and 1313 Compared,” 29–57, and Benjamin Elman, “The Formation of ‘Dao Learning’ as Imperial Ideology During the Early Ming Dynasty,” 58–82, both in *Culture & State in Chinese History*, ed. Theodore Huters et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).
12. Yu Ji, *Daoyuan xuegu lu* [Record of the study of antiquity in the garden of the Way] (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1929–1941), 35.588–589.

13. John Dardess, *Confucianism and Autocracy: Professional Elites in the Founding of the Ming Dynasty* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1983), 195; and HMGJK, 1.18b.
14. John Dardess, “The Transformation of Messianic Revolt and the Founding of the Ming Dynasty,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 29, no. 3 (1970): 539–558; John D. Langlois Jr., “Political Thought in Chin-hua under Mongol Rule,” in *China under Mongol Rule*, ed. John D. Langlois Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 184–185; and Romeyn Taylor, “The Social Origins of the Ming Dynasty (1351–1360),” *Monumenta Serica* 22 (1963): 1–78.
15. HMTJJY, 4.32a; and HMGJK, 1.18a.
16. HMSYK, 1.1a–2a. See Tilemann Grimm, *Erziehung und Politik in konfuzianischen China der Ming-Zeit* [Education and politics in Confucian China during the Ming] (Hamburg: Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens e.V., 1960), 61–64.
17. MS, 3.1724–1725.
18. Rao Zongyi, *Zhongguo shixue shang zhi zhengtong lun* [Political legitimacy in Chinese historiography] (Hong Kong: Longmen Bookstore, 1977); Bol, “The Rise of Local History,” 37–76.
19. CT, 24–25. The Five Classics included the *Poetry*, *Change*, *Documents*, *Springs and Autumns*, and *Record of Rites*. Since Song times, the *Mencius* along with the *Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, and *Analects* comprised the Four Books, which superseded the Five Classics in importance.
20. S. R. Schram, ed., *Foundations and Limits of State Power in China* (London: University of London, 1987), passim.
21. Benjamin Elman and Martin Kern, eds., *Statecraft and Classical Learning: The Rituals of Zhou in East Asian History* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2010). See also CPK, 125–126.
22. Dardess, *Confucianism and Autocracy*, passim.
23. HMTJSY, 2.14a, 2.17a, for examples of Zhu Yuanzhang’s efforts to become classically literate.
24. HMTJJY, 9.5b–6a.
25. Tu Shan, *Mingzheng tongzong* [Chronicle of Ming government] (ca. 1615 edition) (reprint, Taipei: Chengwen Bookstore, 1971), 5.11a. See D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius: A Bilingual Edition* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2003), 315; and Lau, trans., *Confucius. The Analects* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1979), 113.
26. CPK, 205–213; and Michael Nylan, “The *Chin Wen/Ku Wen* Controversy in Han Times,” *T’oung Pao* 80 (1994): 83–136. Bernhard Karlgren understates the place of forgery in Han classical scholarship. See Karlgren, “The Early History of the Chou Li and Tso Chuan Texts,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 3 (1931): 1–59.
27. HMGJK, 1.85b. See Tu Shan, *Mingzheng tongzong*, 5.11a; and Ho Yun-yi, *The Ministry of Rites and Suburban Sacrifices in Early Ming* (Taipei: Shuangye Bookstore, 1980), 95.
28. MS, 139.398; and HMTJJY, 9.5b–6a. Cf. Jia Nailian, “Cong Mengzi jiewen zhi Qianshu” [From the Abridged Text of the Mencius to the Submerged Writings], *Dongbei shida xuebao* (1987): 43–44.

29. See Thomas P. Massey, “Chu Yuan-chang and the Hu-lan cases of the early Ming dynasty” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1983).
30. Tilemann Grimm, “State and Power in Juxtaposition: An Assessment of Ming Despotism,” in *The Scope of State Power in China*, ed. S. R. Schram (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London; Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1985), 27–50.
31. HMZYQC, 2.19a–20a. See Elman, “Philosophy (*I-li*) versus Philology (*K’ao-cheng*): The *Jen-hsin Tao-hsin* Debate,” *T’oung Pao* 59, nos. 4–5 (1983): 175–222.
32. Chin-shing Huang, *Philosophy, Philology, and Politics in Eighteenth-Century China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 157–168.
33. Bol, “The Rise of Local History,” 37–76.
34. *Jinshi dengke lu* [Record of the ascension of palace graduates on the civil palace examination], 1547: 3b–8b, for the imperial palace question, and 19b–33b, for the answer.
35. Langlois, “Political Thought in Chin-hua under Mongol Rule,” 184–185.
36. *Lian Zhongcheng Jinchuan ji* [Collection of Lian Zining from Jinchuan] (1762 edition), 2.1a–7a. See John Langlois Jr., “The Hung-wu Reign,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 7, part 1: *The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644*, ed. Frederick W. Mote and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 150; and Dardess, *Confucianism and Autocracy*, 263.
37. *Lian Zhongcheng Jinchuan ji*, 2.1b–7a.
38. Oliver Moore, “The Ceremony of Gratitude,” in *Court and State Ritual in China*, ed. Joseph P. McDermott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
39. P. A. Herbert, *Examine the Honest, Appraise the Able: Contemporary Assessments of Civil Service Selection in Early Tang China* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1988), 31–34.
40. Brian McNight, “Mandarins as Legal Experts: Professional Learning in Song China,” in NCE, 493–516; and John Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China*, new ed. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 15, 189.
41. HMGJK, 1.19a. See Yan Xianghui, *Dingjia zhengxin lu* [Record of verified and reliable information concerning the top three candidates] (1864 edition), 1.1a.
42. HMGJK, 1.92a.
43. Wada Masahiro, “Mindai kakyō seido no kamoku no tokushoku—hango no dōnyū o megutte” [Special characteristics of the curriculum of the Ming dynasty civil examination system: Concerning the introduction of legal judgment questions], *Hōsei-shi kenkyū* 43 (1993): 271–308.
44. Ibid. See also Wejen Chang, “Legal Education in Qing China,” in ESLIC, 294–296, 323n7, 325n26, 326n27.
45. See the foreword by Liu Sanwu to the *Mengzi jiewen* (1395 edition), 1a, in *Beijing tushuguan guji zhenben congkan*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Shumu Press, 1988).
46. Silas Wu, *Passage to Power: K’ang-hsi and His Heir Apparent, 1661–1722* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 83–105; and Philip Kuhn, *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 187.
47. Hashimoto Mantarō, “Hoppōgō” [Northern Chinese language], in *Gengogaku daijiten*, vol. 3: *Sekai gengo*, part 2-1 (Tokyo: Sanseido Press, 1992), 1088–1089, 1091–1092.

48. Harvey Graff, *The Legacies of Literacy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 2–5, 384–386.
49. WXTK, 30.284.
50. Robert Hartwell, “Demographic, Political, and Social Transformations of China,” *HJAS* 42, no. 2 (1982): 365–426.
51. WXTK, 30.292.
52. HMTJJY, 1.6b–7a.
53. Danjō Hiroshi, “Mindai kakyō kaikaku no seijiteki haikai—nanbokuken no sōsetsu o megutte” [Political background of Ming dynasty reform of civil examinations—Concerning the establishment of quotas for northern and southern candidates], *Tōhōgaku hō* 58 (1986): 499–524.
54. Zheng Kecheng, *Mingdai zhengzheng tanyuan* [Inquiry into the origins of political struggle during the Ming dynasty] (Tianjin: Tianjin Guji Press, 1988), 16–24.
55. HMTJJY, 7.11b–12a.
56. Danjō Hiroshi, “Minsho Kenbunchō no rekishi teki ichi” [The historical position of the Jianwen court in the early Ming], *Chūgoku—bunka do shakai* (1992): 167–175.
57. Philip Huang, *The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985), 54–66; and *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta, 1350–1988* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 40–43.
58. EPLCC, 28–32, 85–88; and CPK, 36–73.
59. HMTJJY, 9.1b–2a; and Gu Yingtai, *Mingshi jishi benmo* [Record of the beginning and end of recorded events in Ming history] (1658 edition) (reprint, Taipei: Sanmin Bookstore, 1969), 153–154.
60. HMTJJY, 10.6a–6b.
61. HMGJK, 2.37b–38a; and HMSYK, 1.20a–20b.
62. MS, 3/1686–1687, 3/1697. The North included five provinces: the Northern Capital Region, Shandong, Shanxi, Henan, and Shaanxi. The South comprised the eastern prefectures belonging to the southern capital region, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Fujian, Huguang, and Guangdong. For the central region, Sichuan, Guangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou, and the western prefectures and townships of the southern capital region were counted together.
63. HMZYQC, 3.46a.
64. Wolfgang Franke notes that the average number of palace graduates rose from about 150 every three years between 1388 and 1448 to 290 between 1451 to 1505 and then to 330 from 1508 to 1643. See Franke, “Historical Writing during the Ming,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 7, part 1: *The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644*, ed. Frederick W. Mote and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 726.
65. Zhu Di’s preface (Xu) to his *Shengxue xinfa* [The method of the mind in the sages’ teachings] (1409 edition) (reprint, Taipei: Zhongguo zixue mingzhu jicheng, 1978).
66. De Bary, *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy*, and Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, skim over the political executions.
67. Elman, “Ming Politics and Confucian Classics: The Duke of Chou Serves King Ch’eng,” in *International Conference Volume on Ming Dynasty Classical Studies*

- (Nankang, Taiwan: Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica, 1996), 95–121.
68. *Mingshi jishi benmo*, 209. For different versions, see Tu Shufang, *Jianwen chaoye hui-bian* [Compendium of unofficial records on the Jianwen reign] (Wanli edition), 10.15a–31a, in *Beijing tushuguan guji zhenben congkan*, vol. 11 (Beijing: Shumu Press, 1988).
 69. HMTJSY, 3.66a–66b; *Jianwen chaoye huibian*, 7.1a–28b; *Mingshi jishi benmo*, 206–207; and Albert Mann, “Fang Hsiao-ju in Light of Early Ming Society,” *Monumenta Serica* 15 (1956): 305–307.
 70. The accounts of Lian’s and Fang’s defiance have become conflated.
 71. Harold Kahn, *Monarchy in the Emperor’s Eyes: Image and Reality in the Ch’ien-lung Reign* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 14–46.
 72. *Mingshi jishi benmo*, 206–219.
 73. *Jianwen chaoye huibian*, 20.24a.
 74. Chan Hok-lam, “The Rise of Ming T’ai-tsu (1368–98): Facts and Fictions in Early Ming Historiography,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95 (1975): 679–715; Romeyn Taylor, trans., *Basic Annals of Ming T’ai-tsu* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1975), 10; and Wolfgang Franke, “The Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty,” in *Historians of China and Japan*, ed. W. G. Beasley and E. G. Pulleyblank (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 60–77.
 75. Carney Fisher, *The Chosen One: Succession and Adoption in the Court of Ming Shizong* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990).
 76. Preface to the *Shengxue xinfafa*, 1a–28a. Cf. Cheuk-yin Lee, “Zhiguo zhi Dao—Ming Chengzu ji qi Shengxue xinfafa” [The art of rulership—the Ming Emperor Chengzu and his *Method of the Mind in the Sages’ Teachings*], *Hanxue yanjiu* 17 (1991): 211–225; and Zhu Hong, *Ming Chengzu yu Yongle zhengzhi* [The Ming emperor Chengzu and politics in the Yongle reign] (Taipei: Teacher’s College Institute of History Monograph, 1988), 81–129.
 77. HMTJJY, 11.8a, 12.17b; and *Mingshi jishi benmo*, 16.193.
 78. HMTJSY, 4.8b–9b; and ZYKSJ, 1.29–30.
 79. Preface to the *Shengxue xinfafa*, 10a.
 80. Mao Peiji, “Cong Shengxue xinfafa kan Ming Chengzu Zhu Di de zhiguo lixiang” [A view of Ming Chengzu Zhu Di’s ideals of ordering the dynasty from his *Method of the Mind in the Sages’ Teachings*], *Mingshi yanjiu* 1 (1991): 119–130.
 81. See Chan, “The Chien-wen, Yung-lo, Hung-hsi, and Hsuan-te Reigns, 1399–1435,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 7, part 1: *The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644*, ed. Frederick W. Mote and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 214–221.
 82. Howard J. Wechsler, “T’ai-tsung (reign 626–49) the consolidator,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 3, part 1: *Sui and Tang China, 589–906*, ed. Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 182–187, 214–215; and Jia, “Cong Mengzi jiewen zhi Qianshu,” 45.
 83. Romeyn Taylor, “Official and Popular Religion and the Political Organization of Chinese Society in the Ming,” in *Orthodoxy in Late Imperial China*, ed. Kwang-ching Liu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 126–157. See also

- K'o-k'uan Sun, "Yü Chi and Southern Taoism during the Yuan Period," in Langlois, *China under Mongol Rule*, 212–253; and James Watson, "Standardizing the Gods: The Promotion of T'ien Hou ('Empress of Heaven') along the South China Coast," in PCLIC, 292–324.
84. Cf. Bol, *This Culture of Ours*, 32–75.
 85. Pierre Bourdieu and Monique de Saint-Martin, "Scholastic Values and the Values of the Educational System," in *Contemporary Research in the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. Eggleston (London: Metheun, 1974), 338–371.
 86. *Dianshi dengke lu* [Record of the ascension of palace graduates], 1371 palace civil examination, in *Yihai zhuchen* [Dust from pearls of writing in the literary world] (Qing edition), 1400: 1/14.
 87. *Dianshi dengke lu*, 1400: 1/1–68. Rhetoric was more muted when dealing with rulers in the same dynasty.
 88. *Dianshi dengke lu* 1400: 1/3. See Xie's biography in MS, 147.4115–4123; and Chan, "The Rise of Ming T'ai-tsu," 688–691.
 89. HMSYK, 1.34a–b.
 90. *Dianshi dengke lu*, 1400: 1/11, 15.
 91. *Jianwen chaoye huibian*, 10.15a–15b.
 92. ZYTK, 1.13a.
 93. See Lin Qingzhang, "Wujing daquan zhi xiuzuan ji qi xiangguan wenti tanqiu" [Inquiry into the compilation of the Complete Collection (of commentaries) for the Five Classics and related issues], *Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiu jikan* 1 (1991): 366–367.
 94. MS, 147.4115–4116; HMGJK, 1.76a–81b; and HMTJJY, 6.10b. See also Qiu Han-sheng, "Mingchu Zhuxue de tongzhi diwei" [The hegemony of Zhu Xi learning in the early Ming], *Zhongguo zhexue* (1988): 142–143.
 95. HMGJK, 1.81b. See also Zhang Chenshi, "Yongle dadian shihua" [Historical remarks on the great compendium of the Yongle era], in *Gudai yaoji kaishu* (Beijing: Zhonghua Bookstore, 1987), 187–192.
 96. Kahn, *Monarchy in the Emperor's Eyes*, 44–46.
 97. HMGJK, 1.81b; and HMTJJY, 13.9a.
 98. See Chan, "The Rise of Ming T'ai-tsu," 689–690.
 99. HMSYK, 2.1a–2b; and HMGJK, 2.47–48a.
 100. HMTJJY, 13.6a.
 101. *Huang-Ming jinshi dengke kao* [Study of the accession of palace graduates during the August Ming dynasty], comp. Yu Xian (1548 edition), 3.2a, in MDDKLHB.
 102. HMTJJY, 13.7b.
 103. HMTJSY, 4.12a.
 104. HMGJK, 1.82a.
 105. See Zhu, *Shengxue xinfafa*, 2b–3a; and Elman, "Philosophy (*I-li*) versus Philology (*K'ao-cheng*)," 177–180.
 106. Preface to the *Shengxue xinfafa*, 24b–25a.
 107. See HMTJJY, 14.11b, 14.18b; and HMTJSY, 4.17a–17b.
 108. Chan, "The Chien-wen, Yung-lo, Hung-hsi, and Hsuan-te Reigns," 221.

109. Chen Hengsong, “Shuzhuan daquan qucai lai yuan tanjiu” [Inquiry into the sources selected for the *Complete Collection of Commentaries for the Documents Classic*]; and Yang Jinlong, “Shizhuan daquan qucai lai yuan tanjiu” [Inquiry into the sources selected for the *Complete Collection of Commentaries for the Poetry Classic*], both in *Mingdai jingxue guoji yantao hui lunwen ji*, ed. Lin Qingzhang (Taipei: Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica, 1996).
110. Gu Yanwu, *Rizhi lu* [Record of knowledge gained day by day], in SKQS, 858.801. The “Trilogy” was facilitated by the earlier completion of the *Yongle dadian*.
111. See the 1780s accounts by the editors of the SKQS project in the SKQSZM, 36.13b–14b, 93.7b–8b. See also MS, 282.7222.
112. Zhu Di, “Yuzhi xingli daquan xu” [Imperial preface to the official presentation of the *Great Collection of Works on Nature and Principle*], in *Xingli daquan* (1415 edition) (reprint, Kyoto: Chūbun Press), 1a–3b.
113. See Hu Guang et al., “Jinshu biao” [Words on presenting the Trilogy series], in *Xingli daquan*, 3b. See also *Da-Ming Taizong Wen huangdi shilu* [Veritable records of the Yongle emperor] (Ming edition) (reprint, Taipei: Academic Sinica, ND), 158.2a–4a.
114. HMTJJY, 11.8a, 12.17b; and *Mingshi jishi benmo*, 16.193.
115. Qiu Hansheng, “Mingchu Zhuxue de tongzhi diwei,” 144–147.
116. Hu Kuang et al., on “benevolence” (*ren*) in the *Lunyu jizhu daquan* [Great collection of the collected notes to the *Analects*], 12.4b–5a, in *Sishu daquan* (SKCS edition). See also Elman, “Criticism as Philosophy: Conceptual Change in Ch’ing Dynasty Evidential Research,” *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, n.s., 17 (1985): 165–198.
117. *Mengzi jizhu daquan* [Great collection of the collected notes to the Mencius], 2.28a–29b (quotation from Hu Bingwen), 8.5b–8b, 10.34a–35b, in *Sishu daquan*. See also Lau, *Mencius*, 189. Cf. Yun-yi Ho, “Ideological Implications of Ming Sacrifices in Early Ming,” *Ming Studies* 6 (Spring 1978): 55–67.
118. Elman, “Where Is King Ch’eng? Civil Examinations and Confucian Ideology during the Early Ming, 1368–1415,” *T’oung Pao* 79 (1993): 64–67; and “Imperial Politics and Confucian Societies in Late Imperial China,” *Modern China* 15, no. 4 (1989): 393–402.
119. Charles Hucker, “Confucianism and the Chinese Censorial System,” in *Confucianism in Action*, ed. David S. Nivison and Arthur Wright (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969), 182–208.
120. See Andrew Lo, trans., “Four Examination Essays of the Ming Dynasty,” *Renditions* 33–34 (1990): 176–178.
121. See Ai Nanying, *Dianyingzi ji* [Collection of the master of heaven’s labors] (1699 edition) (reprint, Taipei: Yiwen Press, 1980), 49 (“Biography,” A.1a) and 10.16a–18a. See also MS, 288.7402.
122. Jia, “Cong Mengzi jiewen zhi Qianshu,” 43–44.
123. Hu Juren, *Juye lu* [Record of the enterprise of sitting in reverence] (SKQS edition), 714.36–44. See also Wing-tsit Chan, “The Ch’eng-Chu School of Early Ming,” in *Self and Society in Ming Thought*, ed. Wm. T. de Bary et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 45–46.
124. MS 147.4125.
125. Jiao Hong, *Guochao xianzheng lu* [Record of verified documents during the Ming dynasty] (1616 Wanli edition) (reprint, Taipei: Student Bookstore, 1984), 20.56a–56b.

126. The emperor's order is part of the "Liangong yishi," appended to *Lian Zhongcheng gong wenji* [Collected writings of Lian Zining] (Ming Wanli edition, 1573–1619), 1a–3a.
127. "Liangong yishi," for the 1573 imperial pardon, appended to *Lian Zhongcheng gong wenji*, 4a–5b.
128. See the Kangxi preface, in SKQS, 710.1–2; and Huang Chin-shing, *Philosophy, Philology, and Politics*, 157–168.
129. Bourdieu and Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1977), 194–210. Cf. Hilde De Weerd, *Competition over Content: Negotiating Standards for the Civil Service Examinations in Imperial China (1127–1279)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007).

2. Ming to Qing

1. Ann Waltner, "Building on the Ladder of Success: The Ladder of Success in Imperial China and Recent Work on Social Mobility," *Ming Studies* 17 (1983): 30–36. Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Economics of Linguistic Exchanges," trans. Richard Nice, *Social Science Information* 16, no. 6 (1977): 645–668.
2. David Johnson, "Communication, Class, and Consciousness in Late Imperial China," in PCLIC, 59.
3. Angela Ki Che Leung, "Elementary Education in the Lower Yangtzu Region in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in ESLIC, 391–396; and EPLCC, 140–154.
4. ETPLIC, 369–390; and EPLCC, 1–23. We should not assume a stark dichotomy between "the classical" and "the vernacular," however. The literary and vernacular registers historically interacted and influenced each other as part of a unified, if hybrid, language system. See Benjamin Elman et al, *Rethinking East Asian Languages, Vernaculars, and Literacies* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, forthcoming).
5. R. A. Houston, *Literacy in Early Modern Europe: Culture and Education 1500–1800*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 2002), 24–33.
6. See Pamela Kyle Crossley, "Manchu Education," in ESLIC, 340–348; and Man-kam Leung, "Mongolian Language and Examinations in Beijing and Other Metropolitan Areas during the Manchu Dynasty in China (1644–1911)," *Canada-Mongolia Review* 1 (1975): 29–44.
7. See Fuma Susumu, "Sōshi hihon no sekai" [The world of the secret handbooks of pettifoggers], in *Mimmatsu Shinsho no shakai to bunka*, ed. Ono Kazuko (Kyoto: Mingwen Press, 1996), 189–238.
8. Hsiao-tung Fei, *China's Gentry: Essays on Rural-Urban Relations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 71–72.
9. Deng Siyu, *Zhongguo kaoshi zhidu shi* [History of Chinese examination institutions] (Taipei: Student Bookstore, 1967), 343–347; and John DeFrancis, *The Chinese Language. Fact and Fantasy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1985), 53–66.
10. Elman, "Qing Schools of Scholarship," *Ch'ing-shih wen-t'i* 4, no. 6 (December 1979): 51–82.
11. Houston, *Literacy in Early Modern Europe*, 90–98; and James Watson, "Chinese Kinship Reconsidered: Anthropological Perspectives on Historical Research," *China Quarterly* 92 (1982): 601.

12. Leung, "Elementary Education in the Lower Yangtzu Region," 381–391.
13. Ōkubo Eiko, *Min-Shin jidai shoin no kenkyū* [Research on academies in the Ming-Qing period] (Tokyo: Kokusho kankōkai, 1976), 221–361; and Ping-ti Ho, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1962), 130–168.
14. Deng, *Zhongguo kaoshi zhidu shi*, 281–282; Ching-i Tu, "The Chinese Examination Essay: Some Literary Considerations," *Monumenta Serica* 31 (1974–1975): 393–406; and Alexander Woodside, "Some Mid-Ch'ing Theorists of Popular Schools," *Modern China* 9, no. 1 (1983): 11–18.
15. Lothar Ledderose, "An Approach to Chinese Calligraphy," *National Palace Museum Bulletin* 7, no. 1 (1972): 1–14. See also Marilyn and Shen Fu, *Studies in Connoisseurship: Chinese Paintings from the Arthur M. Sackler Collections in New York, Princeton, and Washington, D.C.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 9.
16. Jiang Anfu, *Qingdai dianshi kaolue* [Survey of Qing period palace examinations] (Tienjin: Dagong Press, 1933), 9b–11b. During the Tang and Song, calligraphy examinations were given.
17. FPP, 228–235; and ECCP, 676.
18. John Dardess, *Confucianism and Autocracy: Professional Elites in the Founding of the Ming Dynasty* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1983), 13–84.
19. Zhang Hongsheng, "Qingdai yiguan kaoshi ji tili" [Qing dynasty examinations for medical officials with examples], *Zhonghua yishi zazhi* 25, no. 2 (April 1995): 95–96.
20. John Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China*, new ed. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 70–71; and Joseph Levenson, "The Amateur Ideal in Ming and Early Qing Society: Evidence from Painting," in *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, ed. John Fairbank (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 320–341. Cf. FPP, chapters 3–4.
21. Houston, *Literacy in Early Modern Europe*, 61–69.
22. Pierre Bourdieu, "Systems of Education and Systems of Thought," in *Knowledge and Control: New Directions for the Sociology of Education*, ed. Michael Young (London: Collier Macmillan, 1971), 189–207.
23. Brij Tankha, ed., *Okakura Tenshin and Pan-Asianism: Shadows of the Past* (Folkestone, UK: Global Oriental, 2009).
24. Chen Deyun, "Bagu wen xue" [8-legged essay literature], *Lingnan xuebao* 6, no. 4 (June 1941): 17–21, outlines six different positions.
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27. Li Zhi, "Shihwen houxu" [Afterword for contemporary-style essays], in *Fenshu* [A book to be burned] (Beijing: Zhonghua Bookstore, 1975), 117.
28. Andrew Plaks, "*Pa-ku wen*," in *Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, ed. William Nienhauser (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 641–643; and Plaks, "The Prose of Our Time," in *The Power of Culture: Studies in Chi-*

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29. Liang Zhangju, “Liyan” [Outline of contents], in ZYCH, 1a–5a.
 30. See the 1843 prefaces included in ZYCH.
 31. ETPLIC, 419–424; and MS, 3/1693.
 32. RZLJS, 479–480 (*juan* 19), on “Shiwen geshi” (contemporary-style essay form).
 33. See *Jinshi dengke lu* [Record of accession of palace graduates], 1475, unpaginated manuscript.
 34. See *Huishi lu* [Record of the metropolitan civil examination], 1475: 18a.
 35. ZYCH, 4.6a–b; and *Jinshi dengke lu*, 1475.
 36. *Nanguo xianshu* [Book about civil provincial examination worthies in Yingtian prefecture], comp. Zhang Chaorui (1633 edition), 1.6b; HMSYK, 4.13a; and ZYC, late Ming edition, A.6a–13a.
 37. *Huishi lu*, 1445: 45a–47a; and HMZYQC, 4.18a–24a. See also ZYCH, 4.6b.
 38. *Huishi lu*, 1475: 49a. See also *Yangming quanshu* [Complete works of Wang Yang-ming] (SBBY edition) Taipei: Zhonghua Bookstore, 1979), 25.12a–14b.
 39. *Huishi lu*, 1487: 3a–4a; 1490: unpaginated manuscript; 1496: 2.12a. See also *Huishi lu*, 1508, for the Preface] by Wang Ao, and *Huang-Ming chengshi dianyao* [Digest of records of metropolitan examinations during the Ming dynasty] (Late Ming edition), 2.31b.
 40. *Henan xiangshi lu* [Record of the Henan provincial civil examination], 1759.
 41. *Huishi lu*, 1475: 6b–8b. See also D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius: A Bilingual Edition* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2003), 115.
 42. *Huishi lu*, 1475: 6b–7a, 21a–b, 40a, 48a–52b, and 62b–69a; and Tu, “The Chinese Examination Essay,” 403.
 43. D. C. Lau, trans., *Confucius. The Analects* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1979), 114.
 44. Fang Bao, *Qinding Sishu wen* [Imperially authorized essays on the Four Books], vol. 1 (1738; reprint, SBBY edition, Taipei: Commercial Press, 1979), 3.3a–4a. English translation is in Tu, “The Chinese Examination Essay,” 400–402, which I have modified.
 45. You Ruo was one of Confucius’s immediate disciples.
 46. Fang, *Qinding Sishu wen*, vol. 1, 3.3a–4a; and Tu, “The Chinese Examination Essay,” 402.
 47. Plaks, “The Prose of Our Time,” 206–210.
 48. ZYKSJ, 1.37–38.
 49. See QDKJKSSL, 234, 257.
 50. See ZYCH, 2.8a–b; and ETPLIC, 459–469. On the length, see Chen Deyun, “Bagu wen xue,” 48–49.
 51. Yu-shih Chen, *Images and Ideas in Chinese Classical Prose: Studies of Four Masters* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 1–13, 109–114.
 52. E. R. Hughes, “Epistemological Methods in Chinese Philosophy,” in *The Chinese Mind*, ed. Charles Moore (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1967), 28–56.

53. Chung-ying Cheng, "On Implication (*tse*) and Inference (*ku*) in Chinese Grammar," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (June 1975): 225–243.
54. Hughes, "Epistemological Methods," 92.
55. Fu-mei Chang Chen, "On Analogy in Qing Law," *HJAS* 30 (1970): 212–224. Cf. Joachim Kurtz, *The Discovery of Chinese Logic* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 160, 183, 364. See also Wejen Chang, "Legal Education in Qing China," in *ESLIC*, 309–310.
56. QBLC, 21.165–166, 21.173.
57. Jacques Le Goff, *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 88–92.
58. P. Angelo Zottoli, SJ, *Cursus Litteraturae Sinicae*, vol. 5: *Pro Rhetorices Classe pars Oratoria et Poetica* (Shanghai: Catholic Mission, 1882), 12–44.
59. Hughes, "Epistemological Methods," 92, 99; and Robert F. Campany, *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), 21–24. I use "grid" here rather than "genre" because the latter assumes continuities in examination essays since the Song dynasty.
60. See the essays in T. C. Lai, *A Scholar in Imperial China* (Hong Kong: Kelly and Walsh, 1970), 16–18.
61. *Jinke quanti xince facheng* [Models of complete answers for new policy questions in recent provincial civil examinations], compiled and annotated by Liu Tanzhi (1764 edition), "Overview" ["Fanli"], 1a–2a.
62. Ch'ien Mu, *Traditional Government in Imperial China: A Critical Analysis*, trans. Chün-tu Hsueh and George Totten (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1982), 113.
63. *Linwen bianlan* [Overview for writing down essays], 1875 ed., *tiaoli* (regulations), 1a–5b.
64. Chen Deyun, "Bagu wen xue," 23–48; and QDKJKSSL, 231–238.
65. See DML, 13.12b–13b; and Chen Deyun, "Bagu wen xue," 48.
66. RZLJS, *juan* 386–387; and Lung-chang Young, "Ku Yen-wu's Views of the Ming Examination System," *Ming Studies* 23 (1987): 51. See also Willard Peterson, *Bitter Gourd: Fang I-chih and the Impetus for Intellectual Change* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 47.
67. ZYCH, 1.10b. Confucius is said to have compiled the *Annals* to "await a later sage." This is also the source for the use of *zhiyi* to mean "writing an 8-legged essay."
68. Chen Deyun, "Bagu wen xue," 19–20; QDKJKSSL, 230; and Tu, "The Chinese Examination Essay," 405. On the tonal quality of an 8-legged essay, see Qigong, "Shuo bagu" [On the 8-legged essay], *Beijing shifan daxue xuebao* (1991): 56–58.
69. Deng Yunxiang, *Qingdai bagu wen* [Qing dynasty 8-legged essays] (Beijing: People's University Press, 1994), 277–301; Tu, "The Chinese Examination Essay," 393–394; and Andrew Lo, trans., "Four Examination Essays of the Ming Dynasty," *Renditions* 33–34 (1990): 167–168.
70. Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 118.
71. CT 18–19; and ZYKSJ, 4.133. See Lucille Chia, "The Development of the Jianyang Book Trade, Song-Yuan," *Late Imperial China* 17, no. 1 (June 1996): 38.

72. Liu Xiangguang, “Shiwen gao: Keju shidai de kaosheng bidu” [Examination essay compilations: Required reading for examination students], *Newsletter for Modern Chinese History* (Academia Sinica, Taiwan) 22 (1996): 49–68; Peter Bol, “The Examination System and Song Literati Culture,” in *La société civile face à l’État* [Civil society faces the state], ed. Léon Vandermeersch (Paris: École Française d’extrême-orient, 1994), 55; and Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates*, 33–36.
73. ZYCH, *juan* 4–6. See also Liu Xiangguang, “Shiwen gao,” 54.
74. QDKJKSSL, 244–245.
75. Ellen Widmer, “The Huanduzhai of Hangzhou and Suzhou: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Publishing,” *HJAS* 56, no. 1 (June 1996): 77–122, especially 118–119. See also Chia, “The Development of the Jianyang Book Trade, Song-Yuan,” 10–48; and Cynthia Brokaw, “Commercial Publishing in Late Imperial China: The Zou and Ma Family Businesses of Sibao, Fujian,” *Late Imperial China* 17, no. 1 (June 1996): 49–92.
76. Kang Youwei, “Xu” [Preface] to his *Riben shumu zhi shiyu* [Guide to Japanese bibliography] (1897), reprinted in Chen Pingyuan et al., *Ershi shiji Zhongguo xiaoshuo lilun ziliao diyi juan* [Materials on twentieth-century Chinese popular fiction theory], vol. 1 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1989), 13.
77. Liu Xiangguang, “Shiwen gao,” 62–65.
78. DMB, 1399–1400.
79. Dai Mingshi, “Gengchen huishi mojuan xu” [Preface for the collection of examination essays from the 1700 metropolitan examination], in QDQQJYLZX, 2/223.
80. Kai-wing Chow, “Writing for Success: Printing, Examinations, and Intellectual Change in Late Ming China,” *Late Imperial China*, 17, no. 1 (June 1996).
81. *Gui Youguang quanji* [Complete essays of Gui Youguang] (Taipei: Pan’geng Press, 1979), 375–381. See DMB, 759–761; and Peterson, *Bitter Gourd*, 53–54.
82. Ai Nanying, *Ai Qianzi xiansheng quangao* [Complete drafts of examination essays by Ai Nanying] (reprint, Taipei: Weiwen tushu Press, 1977).
83. Fang, *Qinding Sishu wen*, vol. 9, 9.34a–36a; and Lo, “Four Examination Essays of the Ming Dynasty,” 176–178.
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85. Dai’s forwards are in QDQQJYLZX, 2/213–240. See Elman, “Qing Schools of Scholarship,” 15–17.
86. Dai, “Renwu mojuan xu” [Preface for examination essays from 1702], in QDQQJYLZX, 2/238. On Li Fu, see QDQQJYLZX, 2/330–333.
87. FPP, chapter 4; and Sano Kōji, *Shisho gakushi no kenkyō* [Research on Four Books studies] (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1988), 103–155 and 365–368.
88. Sano, *Shisho gakushi no kenkyō*, 371–373; and James J. Y. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 90–92.

89. Yuan Huang, “Fan-li” [Overview], in *Sishu shanzheng* (n.d.), 1b; and *Huang-Ming jinshi dengke kao* [Study of the accession of palace graduates during the august Ming dynasty], comp. Yu Xian (1548 edition), in MDDKLHB, vols. 1–2. See also Cynthia Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 17–27, 231–232; Judith Berling, *The Syncretic Religion of Lin Chao-en* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 49–61, 73–74; and Wei-ming Tu, *Neo-Confucian Thought in Action: Wang Yang-ming’s Youth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).
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92. *Sishu chuwen* [Preliminary questions on the Four Books], comp. Xu Guang (1563 edition), 3.98b, and the preface by Jiang Yingkui, 1b–3a.
93. Jiao Hong, *Xinqie huang-Ming baiming chia Sishu lijie* [Newly carved collection of commentary on moral principle in the Four Books by 100 famous writers of the August Ming] (ca. 1594), A.8b.
94. CPK, 76–77, 104–105.
95. See the “Fanli” [Overview] to Tang Binyin, *Sishu yanming jizhu* (n.d.).
96. *Sishu zhuyi* [Main ideas in the Four Books], comp. Zhou Yanru (1588–1644), who was the *optimus* in 1613. See Chow, “Writing for Success,” 132.
97. ZYCH, 5.10b; and ZYKSJ, 1.40. See Sano, *Shisho gakushi no kenkyō*, 406–418; and DMB, 975–78. See also RZLJS, 111–112 (*juan* 3).
98. Sano, *Shisho gakushi no kenkyō*, 379–380, 420–424.
99. FPP, 140.
100. SKQSZM, 37.14a–b.
101. See CT, 33, 35.
102. See Sano, *Shisho gakushi no kenkyō*, 420–422.
103. Mao Qiling, *Sishu gaizuo* [Changes in the Four Books] (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1936), 19; QDKJKSSL, 248.
104. Kent Guy, “Fang Pao and the *Ch’in-ting Ssu-shu wen*,” 168–175, and Kai-wing Chow, “Discourse, Examination, and Local Elite,” 187, both in ESLIC.
105. Fang, “Fanli” [Overview], in *Qinding Sishu wen*, 1a–2a. See Tu, “The Chinese Examination Essay,” 403–404.
106. Fang, “Fanli,” 2b–3a. See Guy, “Fang Pao,” 167–168; and Chow, “Discourse, Examination, and Local Elite,” 188–190.
107. Guy, “Fang Pao,” 166–167.
108. LBTB, 1781, 2nd month, for the memorial by Fujian censor Dong Zhiming proposing that a sequel to Fang’s earlier collection be compiled.
109. Frank Kermode, “The Canon,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 600–610. See also Kermode, “Institutional Control of Interpretation,” *Salmagundi* 43 (1979): 72–86.

110. Kenneth Burke, *On Symbols and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 63–70.
111. Cf. Eliot Freidson, *Professional Powers: A Study of the Institutionalization of Formal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 1–17.
112. *Huishi lu*, 1523: “Xu” [Preface], p. 1b.
113. *Huishi lu*, 1742: “Xu” [Preface], p. 1a.
114. *Guangdong xiangshi lu* [Record of the Guangdong provincial civil examination], 1729: “Xu” [Preface], pp. 5a–b.
115. “Hunan xiangshi lu xu” [Preface to the Hunan provincial examination], in Qian Daxin, *Qianyan tang wenji* [Collected essays from the Hall of Subtle Research] (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1968), 23.327–328.
116. *Shuntian xiangshi lu*, 1788: 1a (answers).
117. *Shuntian xiangshi lu*, 1831: 45a.
118. *Shuntian xiangshi lu*, 1882: 33a.
119. See MDDKLHB, passim, for comments by Ming examiners. For the Qing, see *Qingdai zhujuan jicheng* [Qing examination essays], 420 vols. (reprint, Taipei: Chengwen Publishing Co., 1993–1994).
120. HMGJK, 1.25a. See also MS, 3/1685, 1688–1689, 1693–1694, 1698–1699.
121. *Huishi lu*, 1445, in MDDKLHB, 2/369–444.
122. QSG, 11/3149, 3152.
123. Iona Man-cheong, “Fair Fraud and Fraudulent Fairness: The 1761 Examination Case,” *Late Imperial China* 18, no. 1 (June 1997).
124. *Huishi lu*, 1586, in MDDKLHB, 20/11135–11174.
125. DML, 13.12b–13b.
126. QBLC, 21.73.
127. Andrew Plaks, “Research on the Gest Library ‘Cribbing Garment,’” *East Asian Library Journal* 11, no. 2 (Autumn 2004): 1–39. See Lucille Chia, “*Mashaben*: Commercial Publishing in Jianyang from the Song to the Ming,” in *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History*, ed. Paul Smith and Richard von Glahn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 284–328.
128. ZYKSJ, 2.48, 2.54, 3.87; HMGJK, 1.53b–54a; QBLC, 21.18–20, 21.33–34; and Chung-li Chang, *The Chinese Gentry* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1955), 188–197.
129. Wu Ching-tzu, *The Scholars*, trans. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1957); and P’u Song-ling [Pu Songling], *Strange Tales from Liao-hai*, trans. Lu Yunzhong, Chen Tifang, Yang Liyi, and Yang Zhihong (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1988). See Cyril Birch, trans., *Scenes for Mandarins: The Elite Theater of the Ming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 200–206.
130. Allan Barr, “Pu Songling and the Qing Examination System,” *Late Imperial China* 7, no. 1 (1986): 89.
131. Justus Doolittle, *Social Life of the Chinese* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1865), 421–428.
132. QBLC, 21.24–25.

133. Yuan Tsing, “Urban Riots and Disturbances,” in *From Ming to Qing: Conquest, Region, and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century China*, ed. Jonathan Spence and John Wills (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 286.
134. Yuan, “Urban Riots and Disturbances,” 292–293.
135. *Ibid.*, 301–302.
136. Huang Guangliang, *Qingdai keju zhidu zhi yanjiu* [Research on the Qing dynasty civil examination system] (Taipei: Jiaxin Cement Co. Cultural Foundation, 1976), 262–264.
137. CPK, 107–108.
138. Lu Shen (1477–1544), *Kechang diaoguan* [Regulations in the examination compendium], 136.4a, in *Yanshan waiji* (Ming, Jiajing edition); and HMGJK, 1.106b–107a. See John Dardess, *A Ming Society: Tai-ho County, Kiangsi, in the Fourteenth to Seventeenth Centuries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 146–149; and T’ung-tsu Ch’u, *Local Government in China under the Qing* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962), 36–55.
139. QBLC, 21.126–127.
140. Dardess, *A Ming Society*, 163–164.
141. Doolittle, *Social Life of the Chinese*, 425–428.
142. *Ibid.*, 26–27; and ZYKSJ, 2.48–49, 2.55, 2.72–73.
143. Chang, *The Chinese Gentry*, 194–195.
144. MS, 3/1702, 7/5650; and ZYKSJ, 2.63–64. Cf. Ray Huang, 1587: *A Year of No Significance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 9–26, 33–41.
145. Qianlong’s 1741 edict on cheating and bribery in the Shuntian provincial examinations is in QDQQJYLZX, 3/7–8.
146. Huang Guangliang, *Qingdai keju zhidu zhi yanjiu*, 270–271.
147. QBLC, 21.87, *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China*, ed. Howard Boorman and Richard Howard (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 417; and Mary Buck, “Justice for All: The Application of Law by Analogy in the Case of Zhou Fuqing,” *Journal of Chinese Law* 7, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 118–127.
148. Buck, “Justice for All,” 127–137.
149. QDKCTL. See also Shang, *Qingdai keju kaoshi shulue*, 325–350; and Huang Guangliang, *Qingdai keju zhidu zhi yanjiu*, 258–275.
150. ZYKSJ, 2.48–49.
151. Ku Chieh-kang, “A Study of Literary Persecution during the Ming,” trans. L. Carrington Goodrich, in *HJAS* (1938): 282–285.
152. ZYKSJ, 2.78–79.
153. Huang Chonglan, *Qian-Ming gongju kaolue* [Brief study of civil examinations in the earlier Ming dynasty] (1834 edition), 2.32a–b. Cf. ZYKSJ, 2.72–77; and ZYC (1733 edition), A.6a.
154. DML, 2.8b–10a; and Huang Guangliang, *Qingdai keju zhidu zhi yanjiu*, 259–261.
155. Oliver J. Moore, *Rituals of Recruitment in Tang China* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).
156. Pasquale M. d’Elia, SJ, ed., *Fonti Ricciane: Documenti originali concernenti Matteo Ricci e la storia delle relazioni tra l’Europa e la Cina* [Ricci sources: original documents concerning Matteo Ricci and the story of the relations between Europe and China] (Rome: Libreria dello Stato, 1942), 1:49.

157. Ku, “A Study of Literary Persecution,” 279–290; and Frederic Wakeman Jr., *The Great Enterprise: The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth-Century China*, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 358n127.
158. Elman, “Imperial Politics and Confucian Societies in Late Imperial China,” *Modern China* 15, no. 4 (1989), 393–396; and Ono Kazuko, *Minki dōsha kō* [Study of Ming dynasty factions and societies] (Kyoto: Dōhōsha, 1996). See also John Meskill, “Academies and Politics in the Ming Dynasty,” in *Chinese Government in Ming Times: Six Studies*, ed. Charles Hucker (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 160–163.
159. Huang Chunglan, *Qian-Ming gongju kaolue*, 238b; and RZLJS, 16388.
160. William Atwell, “From Education to Politics: The Fu She,” in *The Unfolding of Neo-Confucianism*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 333–367.
161. *Yingtian xiangshi lu* [Record of the Yingtian provincial civil examination], 1630: 19b–22a. See Atwell, “From Education to Politics,” 341; and Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise*, 230–231, 279–280, 890–891.
162. Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise*, 113–126.
163. Hans Bielenstein, “Chinese Historical Demography, AD 2–1982,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 59 (1967): 23–24.
164. QDKJSSL, 327–28. Cf. ECCP, 22.
165. Guangyuan Zhou, “Illusion and Reality in the Law of the Late Qing,” *Modern China* 19, no. 4 (October 1993): 442–443.

3. Circulation of Ming-Qing Elites

1. Martin Heijdra, “The Socio-Economic Development of Rural China during the Ming,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 8, ed. Denis Twitchett and Frederick W. Mote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 437–439, outlines Ming population figures in 1600 based on plausible assumptions for low (185 million), middle (231 million), or high (289 million) levels of growth. I have followed his “middle” growth rate figures, which substantially raise the bar on China’s population up to 1600.
2. Liang Ch’i-ch’ao, *Intellectual Trends in the Qing Period*, trans. Immanuel Hsu (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 28. Cf. Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities. Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 161–220. See Ping-ti Ho, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1962).
3. *Songshi* [History of the Song dynasty], comp. Tuo Tuo (1313–1355) et al. (Taipei: Dingwen Bookstore, 1980), 5/3604; and MS, 3/1675.
4. John Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China*, new ed. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 95–115; and Winston Lo, *An Introduction to the Civil Service of Sung China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1987), 30–31, 141–170.
5. The Song school system, but not examinations, also extended down to the county level.

6. Thomas Lee, *Government Education and Examinations in Sung China* (Hong Kong: Chinese University, 1982), 55–137.
7. Alexander Woodside, “Some Mid-Ch’ing Theorists of Popular Schools,” *Modern China* 9, no. 1 (1983): 3–35.
8. Chung-li Chang, *The Chinese Gentry* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1955), 165–209; and Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning*, 3–9, 166–181.
9. Frederick W. Mote, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 7, part 1: *The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644*, ed. Frederick W. Mote and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 6–7.
10. Iona Man-cheong, *The Class of 1761: Examinations, State, and Elites in Eighteenth-Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), gives twenty-five grace examinations.
11. Lo, *An Introduction to the Civil Service*, 19–22, 217–118; and Thomas Metzger, *The Internal Organization of Qing Bureaucracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 397–417.
12. Susan Naquin and Evelyn Rawski, *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 106–114, 123–127, 224–225.
13. G. William Skinner, “Introduction: Urban and Rural in Chinese Society,” in *The City in Late Imperial China*, ed. G. William Skinner (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1977), 272.
14. Tilemann Grim, “Academies and Urban Systems in Kwangtung,” in *The City in Late Imperial China*, 487–490, 496–498.
15. G. William Skinner, “Cities and the Hierarchy of Local Systems,” in *The City in Late Imperial China*, 338–339.
16. G. William Skinner, “Introduction: Urban Development in Imperial China,” in *The City in Late Imperial China*, 19–20.
17. *Ibid.*, 21–23.
18. Robert Oxnham, *Ruling from Horseback: Manchu Politics in the Oboi Regency, 1661–1669* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 84–89; and Lawrence Kessler, *K’ang-hsi and the Consolidation of Qing Rule* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 154–158. Cf. William Ayers, *Chang Chih-tung and Educational Reform in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 44–50.
19. Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning*, 119–56; and Ho, *The Ladder of Success*, 222–254.
20. Elman, “Imperial Politics and Confucian Societies in Late Imperial China: The Hanlin and Donglin Academies,” *Modern China* 15, no. 4 (1989): 387–393.
21. John Meskill, “Academies in the Ming Dynasty,” in *Chinese Government in Ming Times: Seven Studies*, ed. Charles O. Hucker (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 66–138; Mizoguchi Yūzō, “Iwayuru Tōrinha jinshi no shisō” [The thought of the members of the so-called Donglin faction], *Tōyō bunka kenkyūjo kiyō*, 75 (March 1978): 111–341; and Ono Kazuko, “Tōrin tō kō (ichi)” [Study of the Donglin party, part 1], *Tōhō gakuho* 52 (1980): 563–594; and “Tōrin tō kō (ni)” [Study of the Donglin party, part 2], *Tōhō gakuho* 55 (1983): 307–315.
22. QBLC, 21.85.

23. MS, 3/1724–1725. See William Rowe, “Success Stories: Lineage and Elite Status in Hanyang County, Hupeh, c. 1368–1949,” in *Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance*, ed. Joseph Escherick and Mary Rankin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 51–81.
24. Seo Tatsuhiko, “Tōdai no kakyo seido to Chōan no gokaku giri” [The Tang civil service system and graduate rituals in Chang’an], in *Ryūreisei—Chūgoku Chōsen no hō to kokka* (Tokyo: Kyūko shoin, 1986), 239–274.
25. Denis Twitchett, *The Birth of the Chinese Meritocracy: Bureaucrats and Examinations in T’ang China* (London: China Society Occasional Papers, 1974), 12. Cf. Robert Hymes, *Statesmen and Gentlemen: The Elite of Fu-chou, Chiang-hsi, in Northern and Southern Sung* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 29–30; and Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning*, 23–24. During the Ming and Qing, a “prefecture” included just several counties below the provincial level.
26. XWXTK, 41.3185.
27. QDKJSSL, 1–21; and PELC, 35–80.
28. ZYKSJ, 1.29–30.
29. Oliver Moore, *Rituals of Recruitment in Tang China* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2004), 181–229.
30. Sheang [Shang] Yen-liu, “Memories of the Chinese Imperial Civil Service Examination System,” trans. Ellen Klempner, *American Asian Review* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 54–56. Victor Purcell, *Problems of Chinese Education* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1936), 27–28, describes late Qing classical and poetry questions in local examinations.
31. Omura Kōdō, “Shinchō kyōiku shisōshi ni okeru Seiyu kōkun ni tsuite” [Concerning the Amplified Instructions of the Sacred Edict in the history of educational thought in the Qing dynasty], in *Kinsei Chūgoku kyōikushi kenkyū* [Research on early modern Chinese education], ed. Hayashi Tomoharu (Tokyo: Kokutoshu, 1958), 233–246. See Miyazaki Ichisada, *China’s Examination Hell*, trans. Conrad Schirokauer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 23.
32. Victor Mair, “Language and Ideology in the Written Popularizations of the *Sacred Edict*,” in PCLIC, 325–359.
33. John Dardess, *A Ming Society: Tai-ho County, Kiangsi, in the Fourteenth to Seventeenth Centuries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 146–149.
34. ECCP, 788.
35. *Liang-Zhe xuezheng* [Education commissioners in western and eastern Zhejiang] (1610 edition), 2b–5b.23b–25a.
36. ETPLIC, 150–153.
37. RZLJS, 17.392–97; and Makino Tatsumi, “Kō Enbu no seiin ron” [Gu Yanwu’s “Essay on Licentiatees”], in *Kinsei Chūgoku kyōikushi kenkyū* [Research on early modern Chinese education history], ed. Hayashi Tomoharu (Tokyo: Kokutoshu, 1958), 221–229. Under Yongzheng in the 1720s, such exemptions were stopped, but restored under Qianlong.
38. MS 3/1680–1681; and Ho, *The Ladder of Success*, 177 (table 20).
39. Ray Huang, *Taxation and Governmental Finance in Sixteenth-Century Ming China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 313–323; and Qing-lien Huang, “The

- Li-chia* System in Ming Times and Its Operation in Ying-t'ien Prefecture,” *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology* (Academia Sinica, Taiwan) 54 (1983): 103–155.
40. HCXWXTK, 8452–8453.
 41. Thomas Lee, “The Social Significance of the Quota System in Song Civil Service Examinations,” *Journal of the Institute of Chinese Studies* (Chinese University of Hong Kong) 13 (1982): 287–318.
 42. Wolfram Eberhard, *Social Mobility in Traditional China* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962), 22–23; Lo, *An Introduction to the Civil Service*, 22–34; and Frederic Wakeman Jr., *The Fall of Imperial China* (New York: Free Press, 1975), 22, 36n7.
 43. Wang Ao (1450–1524), *Zhenze changyu* [Common sayings of Wang Ao] (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1965), A.20. See Heijdra, “The Socio-Economic Development of Rural China during the Ming,” 437.
 44. RZLJS, 17392–97; Ho, *The Ladder of Success*, 173–183; and Mi Chu Wiens, “Lord and Peasant. The Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century,” *Modern China* 6, no. 1 (1980): 9–12.
 45. Wang Ao, *Zhenze changyu*, A.20; and Dardess, *A Ming Society*, 140.
 46. See Lü Miaow-fen, *Yangming xue shiren shequn* [Yangming Learning and literati organizations] (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, 2003).
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 48. Wada Masahiro, “Mindai kyojinzō no keisei katei ni kan suru ichi kōsatsu” [A study of the formative process of the provincial graduate class in the Ming dynasty], *Shigaku zasshi* 83, no. 3 (March 1978): 36–71, esp. 43.
 49. Gu Gongxie, *Xiaoxia xianji zhaichao* [Selected notes jotted in leisure to pass the summer] (ca. 1797 edition), in *Yongfen lou miji* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1917), *erji*, B.2a.
 50. Cf. Wakeman, *The Fall of Imperial China*, 21–23, with Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell*, 121–122. Miyazaki includes both the Ming and Qing examinations in his estimates. Cf. Allan Barr, “Pu Songling and the Qing Examination System,” *Late Imperial China* 7, no. 1 (1986): 92–103.
 51. Chang, *The Chinese Gentry*, 168. See also T. L. Bullock, “Competitive Examinations in China,” in James Knowles, ed., *Nineteenth Century* (London), 36 (July 1894): 91.
 52. Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning*, 30–34.
 53. Wada, “Mindai kyojinzō,” 38–39.
 54. *Ibid.*, 37–63.
 55. Watari Masamitsu, “Minsho no kakyo fukkatsu to kansei” [Early Ming revival of the civil service examination system and Imperial School students], *Shūkan tōyō gaku* 49 (1983): 19–36. See Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning*, 30–31.
 56. Dardess, *A Ming Society*, 142–146, 160–161.
 57. Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning*, 108–113.
 58. MS 3/1675–76, 1677–1678, 1679, 1682, and 1713; and QSG, 11/3108. See Karl Wittfogel, “Public Office in the Liao Dynasty and the Chinese Examination System,” *HJAS* 10 (1947): 38–39.
 59. MS, 3/1717.
 60. Dardess, *A Ming Society*, 158.

61. MS, 3/1680, 3/1715, 1717. See Dardess, *A Ming Society*, 146–149.
62. Tilemann Grimm, “Ming Education Intendants,” in *Chinese Government in Ming Times: Seven Studies*, 130–139.
63. MS, 2/882, 3/1686. See Wu Zhihe, *Mingdai de ruxue jiaoguan* [Education officials in literati schools during Ming times] (Taipei: Student Bookstore, 1991), 19–20, 267–269; and Dardess, *A Ming Society*, 161.
64. HMGJK, 1.40a; and MS, 69.1679–1680. See Wu, *Mingdai de ruxue jiaoguan*, 25–32; and Tai-loi Ma, “The Local Education Officials of Ming China, 1368–1644,” *Oriens Extremus* 22, no. 1 (1975): 11–27.
65. Ma, “The Local Education Officials of Ming China,” 17–21; and Wu, *Mingdai de ruxue jiaoguan*, 26–28, 80–93, 256–257.
66. Lü Kun, “Jiaoguan zhi zhi” [The institution of education officials], in MDJYLZX, 532–536.
67. Araki Toshikazu, “Yōsei jidai ni okeru gakushin sei no kaikaku” [The reform of education officials in the Yongzheng age], in *Yōsei jidai no kenkyū* [Research on the Yongzheng era] (Kyoto: Tōmeisha, 1986), 503–518.
68. MS, 3/1688.
69. *Zhejiang xiangshi lu* [Record of the Zhejiang provincial civil examination], 1549: 1a–6b.
70. *Zhejiang xiangshi lu*, 1567: 1a–6b.
71. HMGJK, 1.41a.
72. ZYKSJ, 33; MS, 3/1698–1699.
73. HMGJK, 1.43b–44a. See also the *Huishi lu* [Record of the metropolitan civil examination], 1502: 1a–4b, in MDDKLHB, vol. 5.
74. ZYKSJ, 1.11–33.
75. DML, 3.18b–19b; and QBLC, 21.13. See also ZYKSJ, 4.137.
76. *Minsheng xianshu* [Book about civil provincial examination worthies in Fujian], comp. Shao Jiechun (Late Ming edition), 5.15a. See also *Fujian xiangshi lu* [Record of the Fujian provincial civil examination], 1552: 17a, in MDDKLHB, 12/6015.
77. DMB, 807–808.
78. Li Zhi’s comment refers to Zhu Xi’s remarks in the *Zhuzi yulei* [Conversations with Master Zhu classified topically] (1473 edition) (reprint, Taipei: Zhongzheng Bookstore), 116.14a.
79. See Li Zhi, *Xu fenshu* [Continuation to a book destined to be burned] (Beijing: Zhonghua Bookstore, 1975), 66 (*juan* 2).
80. Harold Kahn, *Monarchy in the Emperor’s Eyes: Image and Reality in the Ch’ien-lung Reign* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 115–181.
81. Ho, *The Ladder of Success*, 189.
82. Wada, “Mindai kyojinzō,” 69.
83. Yamamoto Takayoshi, “Gendai ni okeru Kanrin gakushi in ni cuite” [Concerning the Hanlin Academy during the Yuan period], *Tōhōgaku* (1955): 81–99.
84. MS, 3/1695. See Adam Y. C. Lui, *The Hanlin Academy: Training Ground for the Ambitious, 1644–1850* (Hamden, CT: Shoe String Press, Archon Books, 1981).
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88. MS, 3/1702, for the comment; and ZYKSJ, 4.131–132.
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90. Otto Berkelbach von der Sprenkel, "High Officials of the Ming: A Note on the Ch'i Qing Nien Piao of the Ming History," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 14 (1952): 98–99.
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92. Ho, *Ministry of Rites*, 16–19; and Lui, *The Hanlin Academy*, 29–44.
93. ZYKSJ, 4.131–132.
94. Zhang Zhongru, *Qingdai kaoshi zhidu* [Qing civil examination system] (Shanghai: Liming Bookstore, 1931), 41–42.
95. DML, 1.6a–8a.
96. QSG, 11/3099–3100.
97. DML, 1.3a–6a and 1.15b–16a; and QBLC, 21.8.
98. ZYC (1733 edition), 8.1a–5b.
99. *Ibid.*, 8.1a–10a; and DML, 1.16a.
100. Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise*, 1129–1135; and John Williams, "Heroes within Bowshot: Examination Administration, the Lower Yangzi Delta, and the Qing Consolidation of Empire," *Late Imperial China* 30, no. 1 (June 2009): 48–84.
101. *Huishi lu*, 1658: 1a–2b.
102. Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise*, 886–890.
103. DML, 1.10b–13a; and Hans Bielenstein, "Chinese Historical Demography, AD 2–1982," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 59 (1967): 6, 28. Cf. Wang Chen-main, *The Life and Career of Hung Ch'ung-Ch'ou, 1593–1665* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000); and QBLC, 21.9 and 21.127. Cf. Williams, "Heroes within Bowshot," 62–72.
104. DML, 1.1a–3a and 1.14a–15b; and Man-kam Leung, "Mongolian Language and Examinations in Beijing and Other Metropolitan Areas during the Manchu Dynasty in China (1644–1911)," *Canada-Mongolia Review* 1 (1975): 29–44; and Oxnam, *Ruling from Horseback*, 122–124.
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106. DML, 1.9b–10a.
107. *Ibid.*, 6.10b.
108. QSG, 11/3169; and HCXWXTK, 1/8424–8425, 8429, 8433, 8440, 8447, 8450.
109. ECCP, 158.

110. Zhou Huang (d. 1785), “Jiangxi xuezheng zou” [Memorial by the Jiangxi provincial education commissioner], in *Yihui chaojian* [Copied memoranda items], 1762, 8th month, 19th day, in the Ming-Qing Archives, Academia Sinica, Taiwan. See also LBYH, 1763, 4th month, for quotas for the Peng.
111. “Guangxi xuezheng zou” [Memorial of the Guangxi education commissioner], in *Yihui chaojian* (Copied memoranda items), 1767, 7th month, which includes the memorial dated 7th month 28th day.
112. *Libu yihui neige* [Memoranda from the Ministry of Rites for the Inner Court], 1785, 1st month, 26th day.
113. William Rowe, “Education and Empire in Southwest China,” in ESLIC, 421–433.
114. HCXWXTK, 8438.
115. QDDQHDSL, 348.1a–b, 348.5a–b, 350.2b, 370.1a–b. See Huang Guangliang, *Qing-dai keju zhidu zhi yanjiu* [Research on the Qing dynasty civil examination system] (Taipei: Jiaxin Cement Co. Cultural Foundation, 1976), 377–425; and Ho, *The Ladder of Success*, 179–181.
116. Kessler, *K'ang-hsi*, 30–39; and Oxnam, *Ruling from Horseback*, 87–88, 101–108.
117. QSG, 11/3157–3158.
118. “Anhui xuezheng tiben” [Memorial of the Anhui education commissioner], 1765, 7th month, 26th day, in the Ming-Qing Archives, Academia Sinica, Taiwan.
119. DML, 3.19b–20a.
120. QSG, 11/3099, 3158–3159. See also Ho, *The Ladder of Success*, 189.

4. Classical Literacy in Late Imperial China

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5. Ping-chen Hsiung, “Constructed Emotions: The Bond between Mothers and Sons in Late Imperial China,” *Late Imperial China* 15, no. 1 (June 1994): 97–99. Cf. CPK, 57–59; Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 29–67; and Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China’s Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).
6. Patricia Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 21–44.
7. HMGJK, 1.104a; and Arthur H. Smith, *Chinese Characteristics* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1894), 28.
8. Maurice Freedman, *Chinese Lineage and Society: Fukien and Kwangtung* (London: Athlone Press, 1971), 68–96. In the 1720s, legal privileges were eliminated. See

- William Roure, *China's Last Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 114. They were reinstated under Qianlong.
9. CPK, 22–25, 52–59.
 10. Joseph Esherick and Mary Rankin, eds., *Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). See also John Dardess, *A Ming Society: T'ai-ho County, Kiangsi, in the Fourteenth to Seventeenth Centuries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 70.
 11. CPK, 36–73; and Hilary Beattie, *Land and Lineage in China: A Study of T'ung-ch'eng County, Anhwei, in the Ming and Qing Dynasties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), passim. Cf. Harriet Zurndorfer, “Local Lineages and Local Development: A Case Study of the Fan Lineage, Hsiu-ning hsien, Hui-chou, 800–1500,” *T'oung Pao* 70 (1984): 18–59.
 12. Joseph McDermott, “Land, Labor, and Lineage in Southeast China,” paper presented at the Song-Yuan-Ming Transitions Conference, Lake Arrowhead, CA, June 5–11, 1997, 15, 31–32.
 13. Patricia Ebrey and James Watson, eds., *Kinship Organization in Late Imperial China 1000–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). See also Beattie, *Land and Lineage*, 51; and Kai-wing Chow, “Discourse, Examination, and Local Elite: The Invention of the T'ung-ch'eng School in Qing China,” in ESLIC, 197–205.
 14. David Wakefield, *Fen'jia: Household Division and Inheritance in Qing and Republican China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998); and CPK, 6–15.
 15. CPK, xix.
 16. Denis Twitchett, “The Fan Clan's Charitable Estate, 1050–1760,” in *Confucianism in Action*, ed. David Nivison and Arthur Wright (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1959), 122–123; and Rubie Watson, *Inequality among Brothers: Class and Kinship in South China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 7, 98, 105, 175.
 17. Ōkubo Eiko, *Min-Shin jidai shoin no kenkyū* [Research on academies in the Ming-Qing period] (Tokyo: Kokusho kankōkai, 1976), 339–49; Angela Ki Che Leung, “Elementary Education in the Lower Yangzi Region in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in ESLIC, 382–391; and William Rowe, “Education and Empire in Southwest China: Ch'en Hung-mou in Yunnan, 1733–38,” in ESLIC, 427–443.
 18. EPLCC, 28–32, 85–88.
 19. David Johnson, “Communication, Class, and Consciousness in Late Imperial China,” in PCLIC, 59, estimates that there were at least five million classically educated male commoners in Qing times, or roughly 5 percent of the adult male population in 1800, 10 percent in 1700. Such rates were lower during Ming times because private schools were less common. See Ōkubo, *Min-Shin jidai shoin no kenkyū*, 78–85.
 20. E. A. Kracke, “Family vs. Merit in Chinese Civil Service Examinations during the Empire,” *HJAS* 10 (1947): 103–123; Ping-ti Ho, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1962), 70–125, especially table 10 on 114; and Robert Hymes, *Statesmen and Gentleman: The Elite of Fu-chou, Chiang-hsi in North-eastern and Southern Sung* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 34–48.
 21. Etienne Balazs, *Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy*, trans. H. M. Wright (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964), 6–7. Cf. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude

- Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1977), 141–167.
22. Cf. Kenneth Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England. An Enquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West* (New York: Norton, 1974), 3–7; and Bourdieu and Passeron, *Reproduction in Education*, 1–27.
 23. Wolfram Eberhard, *Social Mobility in Traditional China* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962), 22–23; and CPK, 45.
 24. Lu Shen, *Kechang tiaoguan* [Regulations in the civil examination compounds], in *Jili huibian*, comp. Shen Jiefu (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1938 photolithograph of late-Ming edition), 136.4a.
 25. Yuquan Wang, “Some Salient Features of the Ming Labor Service System,” *Ming Studies* 21 (1986): 1–44.
 26. Edward Farmer, “Social Regulations of the First Ming Emperor,” in *Orthodoxy in Late Imperial China*, ed. Kwang-Ching Liu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 116–123; and Yuquan Wang, “Some Salient Features,” 26–29.
 27. Mi Chu Wiens, “Changes in the Fiscal and Rural Control Systems in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” *Ming Studies* 3 (1976): 53–69.
 28. Ray Huang, *Taxation and Government Finance in Sixteenth-Century Ming China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 112–133; and Richard von Glahn, *Fountain of Fortune: Money and Monetary Policy in China, 1000–1700* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
 29. QDDQHDSL, 158.32. See Philip Kuhn, *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 34–36.
 30. John Dardess, *Confucianism and Autocracy: Professional Elites in the Founding of the Ming Dynasty* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1983), 14–19; and Ho, *The Ladder of Success*, 67.
 31. LBTB, 1765, 5th month, by Grand Secretary Fuheng et al.
 32. QDDQHDSL, 381.1a–3a. See Karl Wittfogel, “Public Office in the Liao Dynasty and the Chinese Examination System,” *HJAS* 10 (1947): 39.
 33. QSG, 11/3150–3151; MS, 3/1694; and HCXWXTK, 1/8423. See James J. Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 26–29.
 34. QDHDSL, 381.8a–8b.
 35. Ho, *The Ladder of Success*, 71, rightly argues that “in Ming times there was a great deal of occupational mobility which eventually resulted in status mobility.” However, such occupational mobility was prior to and ancillary to the civil examination process. See also PELC, 19–21.
 36. Ho, *The Ladder of Success*, 70–71.
 37. *Dianshi dengke lu* [Record of the civil palace examination], 1499: 9b.
 38. Ho, *The Ladder of Success*, 59–62; and Yu Zhijia, “Mindai gunko no shakai teki chiyi ni tsuite” [The social status of military households in the Ming dynasty], *Tōyō gakuhō* 71, nos. 3–4 (March 1990): 122.
 39. Hymes, *Statesmen and Gentleman*, 29–61.
 40. Yu, “Mindai gunko,” 91–129.
 41. CPK, 52–54.
 42. Yu, “Mindai gunko,” 106–121.

43. *Suzhou zhuangyuan* [Suzhou *Optimi*], comp. Hu Min (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1996), 261–334; and ZYKSJ, 4.125.
44. Hans Bielenstein, “The Regional Provenance of *Chin-shih* during Ch’ing,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* (Stockholm) 64 (1992): 17.
45. Ikoma Shō, “Minsho kakyo gokakusha no shushin ni kan suru ichi kōsatsu” [A study of birthplaces of successful examination candidates during the early Ming], in *Yamane Yukio kyōju taikyū kinen Mindaishi ronshū jō* (Tokyo: Kyoko shoin, 1990), 45–71; and Lǚ Miaw-fen, *Yangming xue shiren shequn* [Yangming Learning and literati organizations] (Taipei Shi: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, 2003), chapter 1.
46. Philip de Heer, *The Care-Taker Emperor: Aspects of the Imperial Institution in Fifteenth-Century China as Reflected in the Political History of the Reign of Chu Ch’i-yü* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), *passim*; and Dardess, *A Ming Society*, 105–106, 110–111, 144–145, 167–169, 202–203.
47. Ho, *The Ladder of Success*, 228 (table 28). Fujian also saw a substantial drop in its palace graduates under the Qing.
48. Bielenstein, “The Regional Provenance of *Chin-shih* during Ch’ing,” 6–178.
49. *Ibid.*, 17–18, 30, 32, 33.
50. *Ibid.*, 21, 30, 77–78.
51. William Rowe, “Education and Empire in Southwest China: Ch’en Hung-mou in Yunnan, 1733–38,” in *ESLIC*, 417–457.
52. Danjō Hiroshi, “Mindai nanbokuken no shisō haikei” [The intellectual background to the northern versus southern examination papers case during the Ming dynasty], in *Higashi Ajiashi ni okeru bunka denpa to chihōsa no shosō*, ed. Kotani Nakao et al. (Gofuku, Toyama: Toyama University Humanities Division, 1988), 55–66.
53. Wu Ching-tzu [Wu Jingzi], *The Scholars*, trans. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1957), 17–18; and Paul Ropp, *Dissent in Early Modern China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), 61–75.
54. *Minsheng xianshu* [Book about civil provincial examination worthies in Fujian], comp. Shao Jiechun (Late Ming edition), 1.38a–42a.
55. QBLC, 21.25, 21.38, 21.42.
56. For a 1741 example, see QDDQHDSL, 386.8b.
57. ETPLIC, 154–156.
58. QBLC, 21.95; *Xuzeng kechang tiaoli* [Continuation to the imperially prescribed guidelines for the civil examination grounds] (1855 edition), 9a, 27b–28a, 40a–41a, 50b–52b.
59. GCGJKL, 1.30b; and QBLC, 21.67–68.
60. LBTB, 1770, 10th month, 5th day.
61. See the memorial Zhuang Cunyu prepared after the 1784 metropolitan examination in LBTB, 1784, 3rd month, 29th day.
62. GCGJKL, 3.26b.
63. Smith, *Chinese Characteristics*, 29; and E. L. Oxenham, “Ages of Candidates at Chinese Examinations; Tabular Statement,” *Journal of the China Branch of the*

- Royal Asiatic Society*, n.s., 23 (1888): 286–287. See also Justus Doolittle, *Social Life of the Chinese* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1865), 398.
64. Hsiao Kung-chuan, *Rural China; Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1960), 67–72.
 65. See also Bielenstein, “The Regional Provenance of *Chin-shih* during Ch’ing,” 11.

5. Anxiety, Dreams, and the Examination Life

1. Fang Yizhi’s (1611–1671) “Seven Solutions,” written in 1637, presents options for a young man of means, one of which is the “examination man”; translated in Willard Peterson, *Bitter Gourd: Fang I-chih and the Impetus for Intellectual Change* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 44–47.
2. David Nivison, “Protest against Conventions and Conventions of Protest,” in *The Confucian Persuasion*, ed. Arthur Wright (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1960), 177–201; and Walter Abell, *The Collective Dream in Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 57–66.
3. Sheang [Shang] Yen-liu, “Memories of the Chinese Imperial Civil Service Examination System,” trans. Ellen Klempner, *American Asian Review* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 52.
4. Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1964), 43–44.
5. Robert Hegel, “Distinguishing Levels of Audiences for Ming-Qing Vernacular Literature: A Case Study,” in PCLIC, 125–126; and Paul Ropp, *Dissent in Early Modern China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), 18–32. I use “popular” to mean “nonofficial” rather than “nonelite.”
6. See Brigid Vance, “Textualizing Dreams in a Late Ming Encyclopedia” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2012), chapter 1; and Judith Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 132–181. For the Song, see John Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China*, new ed. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 177–181.
7. *Tang-Song kechang yiwen lu* [Recording unusual matters heard in the Tang and Song examination grounds] (Guangzhou, Weijing tang shufang edition. Qiantang, 1873 reprint).
8. QDMKTL, 1.1a–19b.
9. David Nivison, *The Life and Thought of Chang Hsueh-ch’eng (1738–1801)* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1966); and FPP, 167–168. See also David Johnson, “Communication, Class, and Consciousness in Late Imperial China,” in PCLIC, 50–67.
10. T’ien Ju-k’ang, *Male Anxiety and Female Chastity: A Comparative Study of Chinese Ethical Values in Ming-Qing Times* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 83–89; and Martin Huang, *Literati and Self-Re/Presentation: Autobiographical Sensibility in the Eighteenth-Century Chinese Novel* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 26–27.
11. John Dardess, “The Management of Children and Youth in Upper-Class Households in Late Imperial China,” paper presented at the Summer 1987 meetings of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association at Occidental College, Pasadena, CA.

12. Cited in Wu Han, *Zhu Yuanzhang zhuan* [Biography of Zhu Yuanzhang] (Beijing: Sanlian Bookstore, 1949), 235.
13. ETPLIC, 150–152; and Peterson, *Bitter Gourd*, 44–47. Cf. Jack Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 59–77, 86–91, 234–243.
14. Lu Shiyi (1611–1672), in QDQQJYLZX, 1/129–144.
15. Hoyt Tillman, “Encyclopedias, Polymaths, and Tao-hsueh Confucians,” *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 22 (1990–1992): 89–108. See Herbert Giles, trans., *San Tzu Ching: Elementary Chinese* (reprint of 1910 original) (Taipei: Wenzhi Press, 1984); Cynthia Brokaw, “Commercial Publishing in Late Imperial China: The Zou and Ma Family Businesses of Sibao, Fujian,” *Late Imperial China* 17, no. 1 (June 1996): 74, notes the “large number of editions of the *Three Character Classics*” in Fujian province in Ming times.
16. Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 128.
17. Zhang Zhigong, *Chuantong yuwen jiaoyu chutan* [Preliminary inquiry into traditional language education] (Shanghai: Education Press, 1962), 3–86; and Angela Ki Che Leung, “Elementary Education in the Lower Yangzi Region in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in ESLIC, 393–396; and EPLCC, 136–139.
18. Sheang [Shang], “Memories of the Chinese Imperial Civil Service,” 49–52.
19. Justus Doolittle, *Social Life of the Chinese* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1865), 377–378. John Henry Gray in his *China: A History of the Laws, Manners and Customs of the People* (London: Macmillan, 1878), 167–168, describes the “din which arises from a Chinese schoolroom” in the 1870s, made by students “committing their lessons to memory.”
20. ETPLIC, 391–392; and Thomas H. C. Lee, “Song Schools and Education before Zhu Xi,” in NCE, 130–131.
21. Wang Yun, “Jiao tongzi fa” [On teaching youthful students], in QDQQJYLZX, 3/484–492.
22. Harvey Graff, *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 10–11.
23. FPP, 252–253.
24. Lee, “Song Schools and Education,” 131–132.
25. T. H. Tsien, *Written on Bamboo and Silk* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 24; John DeFrancis, *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1984), 82–85; and Tillman, “Encyclopedias, Polymaths, and Tao-hsueh Confucians,” 94–98.
26. Wang Chang, *Chunrong tang ji* [Collection from the Hall of Cheerful Spring], 1807 ed., 68.9a–b. Cf. Alexander Woodside and Benjamin Elman, “The Expansion of Education in Qing China,” in ESLIC, 534.
27. In the Tang, Song, and Yuan and from 1370 until 1786, candidates specialized on one of the Five Classics. After that, until 1900, they had to master all of them.
28. Ichisada Miyazaki, *China’s Examination Hell*, trans. Conrad Schirokauer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 16.

29. Sheang [Shang], “Memories of the Chinese Imperial Civil Service,” 52.
30. *Gujin tushu jicheng* [Synthesis of books and illustrations past and present] (Beijing: Imperial Woodblock, 1728 ed.), vol. 606, 112.32a–34a. Cf. Tsien, *Written on Bamboo and Silk*, 73–76.
31. *Gujin tushu jicheng*, vol. 606, 112. 34b. Cf. Jonathan Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), 156–157.
32. Wang Yun, “Jiao tongzi fa,” 486.
33. Ssu-yü Teng and Knight Biggerstaff, compilers, *An Annotated Bibliography of Selected Chinese Reference Works*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 97–98. For discussion, see James J. Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 146–150.
34. *Enke huishi lu* [Grace metropolitan civil examination], 1890: 27b.
35. *Cai Yuanpei quanji* [Complete works of Cai Yuanpei] (Tainan: Wangjia Press, 1968), 462. Cf. ETPLIC, 404–405.
36. Spence, *The Memory Palace*, 3–4, 140–141, and 160–161; and Eugenio Menegon, “The Catholic Four-Character Classic (*Tianzhu Shengjiao Sizijing*): A Confucian Pattern to Spread a Foreign Faith in Late Ming China” (Seminar paper, University of California, Berkeley, Fall 1992). Cf. Francis Yates, *The Art of Memory* (New York: Penguin, 1969).
37. John Dardess, “The Cheng Communal Family: Social Organization and Neo-Confucianism in Yuan and Early Ming China,” *HJAS* 34 (1974): 7–53.
38. M. Theresa Kelleher, “Back to Basics: Zhu Xi’s *Elementary Learning* (*Hsiao-hsueh*),” in *NCE*, 219–251.
39. Han classicists referred to “Six Classics.” During the Tang and Song, the Classics were often organized as the “Seven,” “Nine,” or “Thirteen Classics.” Beginning in the Yuan and Ming, the “Five Classics” became the core “Classics” in the civil examinations.
40. FPP, 252.
41. ETPLIC, 153–156, 346–350, 376–377.
42. *Ibid.*, 376–379.
43. *Ibid.*, 64–85. For writing primers, see Zhang Zhigong, *Chuantong yuwen jiaoyu chutan* [Preliminary inquiry into traditional language education] (Shanghai: Education Press, 1962), 87–92.
44. Zhang Zhigong, *Chuantong yuwen jiaoyu chutan*, 92–106.
45. *Ibid.*, 118–143.
46. ETPLIC, 440–458.
47. *Ibid.*, 155.
48. Zhang Zhigong, *Chuantong yuwen jiaoyu chutan*, 118–134.
49. Roger Chartier, “Gutenberg Revisited from the East,” *Late Imperial China* 17, no. 1 (1996): 1–9, invokes European cultural practices to evaluate Ming and Qing forms of reading and writing.
50. ZYCH, 1.10b.
51. Zhang Xuecheng, “Lun kemeng xue wenfa” [On teaching students to write], in *Zhangshi yishu* [Bequeathed works of Mr. Zhang Xuecheng] (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1936 reprint), “Buyi” [Supplement], 3a.

52. Zhang Zhigong, *Chuantong yuwen jiaoyu chutan*, 139–143. For the different views of writing, see ETPLIC, 447–449. For an overview of Qing classical writing primers, see ETPLIC, 64–83.
53. Wang Yun, “Jiao tongzi fa,” 485–486.
54. ETPLIC, 458–461.
55. Theodore Hutters, “From Writing to Literature: The Development of Late Qing Theories of Prose,” *HJAS* 47, no. 1 (June 1987).
56. Zhang Xuecheng, “Lun kemeng xue wenfa,” “Buyi,” 1b–2a.
57. Nivison, “Protest against Conventions,” 195–201.
58. Tang Zhijun et al., *Xi-Han jingxue yu zhengzhi* [Classicism and politics in the Western Han] (Shanghai: Guji Press, 1994), 61–82.
59. See ZYKSJ, 1.4, 1.10; and QSG, 11.3151–3152 (*juan* 108).
60. *Zhejiang xiangshi lu* [Record of the Zhejiang provincial civil examination], 1492: 16a–21a.
61. HMGJK, 1.63b–64a.
62. *Huishi lu*, 1484 [Record of the metropolitan civil examination, unpaginated], 1487: 6b, and 1499: 5a–11b.
63. HMGJK, 1.72b–73a.
64. Hans van Ess, “Hu Hong’s Philosophy,” in *Dao Companion to Neo-Confucian Philosophy*, ed. John Makeham (New York: Springer, 2010), 105–106.
65. ETPLIC, 210.
66. Zhu Yizun, *Baoshu ting ji* [Collection from the Pavilion for Honoring Books] (Shanghai: Commercial Press, SBCK, 1919–1937), 60.10a–b.
67. RZLJS, 471–473 (*juan* 19); and FPP, 150–156.
68. *Guochao liang-Zhe keming lu* [Record of examinations in Zhejiang during the Qing dynasty] (1857 edition) (Beijing), 139a, and ZYCH, 1.2a–2b.
69. *Jiangnan xiangshi lu* [Record of the Jiangnan provincial civil examination], 1747: 26a.
70. Weng Fanggang (1733–1818), “Zixu” [Personal preface] to his *Shizhou shihua* [Poetry talks from rock islets], in *Qing shihua xubian* [Qing works on poetry discussions, continuation], comp. Guo Shaoyu (Shanghai: Guji Press, 1983), 1363.
71. See DML, 16.10a–12a. Cf. Miyazaki, *China’s Examination Hell*, 111–129.
72. C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 265–268. See QMKCYWL, B.31a, B.53a–b.
73. Allan Barr, “Pu Songling [P’u Song-ling] and the Qing [Ch’ing] Examination System,” *Late Imperial China* 7, no. 1 (1986): 103–109.
74. Jacques Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries*, trans. Franciscus Verellen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 226; and Liao Hsien-huei, “Popular Religion and the Religious Beliefs of the Song Elite, 960–1276” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2001). Cf. Julia K. Murray, “The Temple of Confucius and Pictorial Biographies of the Sage,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 55, no. 2 (May 1996): 269–300.
75. Terry Kleeman, “Introduction,” in *A God’s Own Tale: The Book of Transformations of Wenchang, the Divine Lord of Zitong*, trans. Terry Kleeman (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), 49, 73–75.

76. Kleeman, *A God's Own Tale*, 290–291.
77. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, 270–271.
78. QMKCYWL, A.14a, A.17a–b, and B.13a. See Angela Leung (Liang Qizi), *Shishan yu jiaohua: Ming-Qing de cishan zuzhi* [Performing merit and transforming through culture: Charitable institutions in Ming and Qing] (Taipei: Lianjing Press, 1997), 132–134.
79. Guan Yu was honored first as a “lord,” before later becoming a “king,” and in late Ming he became an “emperor.”
80. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, 159–161; and Prasenjit Duara, “Superscribing Symbols: The Myth of Guandi, Chinese God of War,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 47, no. 4 (November 1988): 783–785.
81. QMKCYWL, A.46a, B.30a–31a, and B.32b–33a.
82. DMB, 1608–1611.
83. *Qingbai leichao*, 74.91–92 and 74.95; and *Guochao kechang yiwen lu* [Recording unusual matters heard in the Qing examination grounds] (Guangzhou: Weijing tang shufang edition, Qiantang, 1873 reprint), 1.15b–16a.
84. Kenneth DeWoskin, “The Six Dynasties *Chih-kuai* and the Birth of Fiction,” in *Chinese Narrative*, ed. Andrew Plaks (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 21–52; and Glen Dudbridge, *Religious Experience and Lay Society in Tang China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 64. Cf. Paul Katz, *Demon Hordes and Burning Boats: The Cult of Marshall Wen in Late Imperial Chekiang* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 113–115.
85. Timothy Brook, *Praying for Power: Buddhism and the Formation of Gentry Society in Late-Ming China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series, 1993), 288–290.
86. Richard von Glahn, “The Enchantment of Wealth: The God Wutong in the Social History of Jiangnan,” *HJAS* 51, no. 2 (December 1991): 695–704.
87. QMKCYWL, A.47a–b; and Gernet, *Buddhism*, 250–253, 286–297.
88. QMKCYWL, B.24b–25a.
89. QMKCYWL, A.24b.
90. Cynthia Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 17–27, 68, 231–232.
91. QMKCYWL, B.24a; and QBLC, 74.99.
92. ZYKSJ, 3.97–98.
93. *Ibid.*, 4.119–120.
94. QBLC, 21.91–92. Chen is best known for his early eighteenth-century encyclopedia.
95. Daniel Overmyer, “Values in Chinese Sectarian Literature: Ming and Qing *Pao-chüan*,” in PCLIC, 219–254.
96. *Ibid.*, 245–250.
97. *Xiaoshi yiwen lu* [Recording unusual matters heard in the local examination grounds] (Qiantang, 1873 reprint), 3a–4b, 12a–b; and QMKCYWL, A, 38b–39a.
98. See Sheang [Shang], “Memories of the Chinese Imperial Civil Service,” 65–66.
99. QMKCYWL, B.45a–b.

100. Ibid., B.54b.
101. QBLC, 74.124–125.
102. Ibid., 74.102–103, 74.105.
103. ZYKSJ, 4.118.
104. QMKCYWL, B.30a.
105. ZYKSJ, 4.140–141.
106. QBLC, 21.82.
107. Ibid., 21.107.
108. QMKCYWL, B.27a.
109. ZYKSJ, 3.88–89; and QMKCYWL, B.44a–45a. See Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell*, 46–47.
110. QBLC, 74.168.
111. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, 267–268.
112. Judith Berling, “Religion and Popular Culture: The Management of Moral Capital in *The Romance of the Three Teachings*,” in PCLIC, 208–212.
113. Richard Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers: Divination in Traditional Chinese Society* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 173.
114. Zhu Pingyi, *Handai de xiangren shu* [The technique of physiognomy in the Han period] (Taipei: Xuesheng Bookstore, 1990), presents the roots of this mantic approach.
115. Terence Russell, “Chen Tuan at Mount Huangbo: A Spirit-writing Cult in Late Ming China,” *Asiatische Studien* 44, no. 1 (1990): 107–140.
116. Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers*, 131–257.
117. Herrlee Creel, *Confucius and the Chinese Way* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960); and Pei-yi Wu, *The Confucian's Progress: Autobiographical Writings in Traditional China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 230. See Huang, *Literati and Self-Re/Presentation*, 143–152.
118. QBLC, 73.100–119; and Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers*, 174–186.
119. On *bazi* methods for reading fate, see Chao Wei-pang, “The Chinese Science of Fate-Calculation,” *Folklore Studies* 5 (1946): 313.
120. ZYTK, 6.38a–42b, 6.43a–48b. The collection called *Ming zhuangyuan tukao* [Illustrated survey of *optimi* during the Ming dynasty] was begun by Gu Dingchen (1453–1540), himself a 1505 *optimus*, and continued by his grandson Gu Zuxun. Their version covered Ming *optimi* from 1371 to 1571. Wu Cheng'en and Cheng Yizhen added materials that brought it up to date to 1604. Materials for 1607–1628 were added later. Chen Mei and Jian Houfu added materials covering 1631–1682 for Qing *optimi*. See also Richard Smith, *Chinese Almanacs* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1992), 25–33.
121. ZYTK, 2.36b–37b.
122. Ibid. See also *Jinshi* [History of the Jin dynasty], comp. Tuo Tuo (1313–1355) (Beijing: Zhonghua Bookstore, 1975), 301.
123. QMKCYWL, B.39a–b.
124. Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers*, 94–119.
125. Xu Dishan, *Fuji mixian de yanjiu* [Research on spirit-writing superstition] (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshu guan, 1971), 49–50; and Russell, “Chen Tuan at Mount Huangbo,” 108–116.

126. QBLC, 73.13–14; and Overmyer, “Values in Chinese Sectarian Literature,” 221; Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers*, 226–228.
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128. Russell, “Chen Tuan at Mount Huangbo,” 123.
129. QBLC, 73.22.
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134. QMKCYWL, B.30a–b.
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137. Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers*, 131–159.
138. Yao Weijun, *Shenmi de zhanmeng* [Mysteries of dreams] (Guangxi: People’s Press, 1991), 3–18; and Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates*, 179–180.
139. Liu Wenying, *Zhongguo gudai de mengshu* [Dream books from ancient China] (Beijing: Zhonghua Bookstore, 1990), 1–65; Roberto Ong, *The Interpretation of Dreams in Ancient China* (Bochum, Germany: Studienverlag Brockmeyer, 1985), 8–46; and Carolyn Brown, ed., *Psycho-Sinology: The Universe of Dreams in Chinese Culture* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988).
140. Vance, “Textualizing Dreams”; and Lienche Tu Fang, “Ming Dreams,” *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, n.s., 10, no. 1 (June 1973): 61–70.
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143. QBLC, 74.109.
144. Yao Weijun, *Shenmi de zhanmeng*, 19–35.
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146. C. G. Jung, *Dreams* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 39–41, 73–74.
147. Zhang, “Xu” [Preface], in *Mengzhan leikao* (late Ming edition), 1a–b. See also Fang, “Ming Dreams,” 59–60; and Ong, *The Interpretation of Dreams in Ancient China*, 165–166.

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149. ZYTK, 1.5b. See also Fang, “Ming Dreams,” 60; and Rudolph Wagner, “Imperial Dreams in China,” in *Psycho-Sinology*, 11–24.
150. ZYTK, 1.21a. See also Fang, “Ming Dreams,” 60–61.
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152. Zou Shaozhi and Gui Sheng, *Zhongguo zhuangyuan quwen* [Interesting things heard about Chinese *optimi*] (Taipei: Hanxin Cultural Enterprises, 1993).
153. See the “Overview” (“Fanli”) in the ZYTK, 1a–b, and Shen Yiguan’s preface, ZYTK, 1a–b.
154. Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange*, 137, 173, describes the wood-block print technique of illustrating dreams as a “dream bubble.”
155. ZYTK, *passim*.
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160. Sheang [Shang], “Memories of the Chinese Imperial Civil Service,” 52.
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171. *Dianshi zhai huabao* [The Dianshi Pavilion’s pictorial], serial 2, vol. 11 (1897), xu 12, 91b–92a (reprint, Yangzhou: Jiangsu Rare Books, 1983).
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177. See Barr, “Pu Songling,” 107–108.
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6. Limits of Dynastic Power

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2. "Shuntian fu tiben" [Memorials from Shuntian prefecture], 1767, 5th month, 26th day. See also the *Gongbu tiben* [Memoranda including memorials from the Ministry of Works], 1767, 7th month, 11th day. Both are in the Ming-Qing Archives, Academia Sinica, Taiwan.
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107. QDDQHDSL, 386.13a, 15b, 18a, 19a–b. See Elisabeth Kaske, “Fund-Raising Wars: Office Selling and Interprovincial Finance in Nineteenth-Century China,” *HJAS* 71, no. 1 (2011): 69–141.
108. See Mary Wright, *The Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism: The T’ung-chih Restoration, 1862–1874* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957), 79–87.
109. Feng Guifen, *Jiaobin lu kangyi* [Protests from the hut of revision], 1897 (reprint, Taipei: Xuehai Press, 1967), 1.17b–19a. I have modified the translation in Mary Wright, *The Last Stand*, 85.
110. QDDQHDSL, 386.19b–20b.
111. FPP, chapter 1; and Ori Sela, “Qian Daxin (1728–1804): Knowledge, Identity, and Reception History in China, 1750–1930” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2011).

7. From Ming to Qing Policy Questions

1. CT, 21–24.
2. Tang’s *Wenbian* [Compilation of essays] was included in the 1780s in the SKQS (1999 electronic version), 1377/101–117.

3. See HMZYQC, ZYC (1733 edition and Late Ming Jiaqing edition). See *Lidai jindian dianshi dingjia zhujuan* [Examination essays of the top three graduates of civil and palace examinations of several dynasties], 2 vols., comp. Zhong Guangjun et al. (Shijiazhuang: Huashan Arts Press, 1995).
4. Wen's answer was reproduced in many Ming-Qing collectanea and in the SKQS.
5. Yuan dynasty policy questions are in Huang Jin, *Jinhua Huang xiansheng wenji* [Collected essays of Huang Jin from Jinhua] (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1919–1937), 191–200. Early Ming policy questions are in *Huang-Ming wenheng* [Balancing of essays from the Ming dynasty] (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1919–1937), 23, 220–222.
6. *Juye zhengshi* [Correct models for examinations] (Ming Jiajing edition, ca. 1522–1566), 1a–58b, gives examples from 1529–1553 policy questions; see also *Ming Wanli zhi Chongzhen jian xiangshi lu huishi lu huiji* [Digest of provincial and metropolitan civil examination records from the Wanli and Chongzhen reigns of the Ming dynasty] (late Ming edition).
7. HMCH.
8. *Huang-Ming xianghui shi ersan chang chengwen xuan* [Selection of model examination essays from the second and third sessions of the provincial and metropolitan civil examinations during the Ming dynasty], comp. Chen Renxi (1633 *Baisong tang* edition).
9. LBTB, 1757, 10th month, 6th day, by the Grand Secretary Chen Shiguan (1680–1758), requesting the Qianlong emperor to choose the policy question topics for the metropolitan military examination.
10. LBTB, 1757, 5th month, 9th day, by the Grand Secretary Laibao, requesting the Qianlong emperor to rank the top ten policy essays for the palace examination.
11. LBTB, 1775, 4th month, memorial by the palace examination reader. See also the 220 palace examination papers from 1646 to 1904, in the Han Yü-shan Collection, in the Department of Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.
12. See QDMKTL, 2.7b–13b and 2.21b–25a.
13. LBTB, 1760, 10th month, 15th day, report by the Hanlin Academy on Shanxi.
14. See Wu Shengqin, “Qianlong sanshiliu nian Hubei xiangshi cewen er shou” [Two policy questions from the 1771 Hubei provincial examination], in QDQQJYLZX, 3/167.
15. See Wejen Chang, “Legal Education in Qing China,” in ESLIC, 294–295, 234–235n17–20.
16. Elman, “The Unraveling of Neo-Confucianism: From Philosophy to Philology in Late Imperial China,” *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, n.s., 15 (1983): 67–89.
17. Willard Peterson, “Fang I-chih: Western Learning and the ‘Investigation of Things,’” in *The Unfolding of Neo-Confucianism*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 399–400.
18. Sun Xingyan, “Guanfeng shishi cewen wutiao youxu” [Preface for observations on trends in five policy questions for testing literati], in QDQQJYLZX, 3/285–286.
19. Lin Qingzhang, *Mingdai kaozheng xue yanjiu* [Study of Ming dynasty evidential research] (Taipei: Student Bookstore, 1984), stresses late Ming developments. Cf.

- Adam Schorr, “Connoisseurship and the Defense against Vulgarity: Yang Shen (1488–1559) and His Work,” *Monumenta Serica* 41 (1993): 89–128.
20. Ying-shih Yü, “Some Preliminary Observations on the Rise of Qing Confucian Intellectualism,” *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, n.s., 11, nos. 1–2 (December 1975): 125; and Lin Qingzhang, *Qingchu de qunjing bianwei xue* [Study of forged classics in the early Qing] (Taipei: Wenjin Press, 1990), 369–386.
 21. *Huishi lu* [Record of the metropolitan civil examination], 1445: 1/347–349, 438–441, in MDDKLHB.
 22. *Guangxi xiangshi lu* (Record of the Guangxi provincial civil examination), 1471: 3/1097–98, in MDDKLHB.
 23. *Ibid.*, 1471: 1111–1112.
 24. *Ibid.*, 1471: 1120–1121.
 25. *Huishi lu*, 1475: 9b–17b and 48b.
 26. *Ibid.*, 53a.
 27. Hung-lam Chu, “Ch’iu Chün (1421–95) and the ‘Ta-hsueh yen-i pu’: Statecraft Thought in Fifteenth-Century China” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1983), 225–228. See also Chu’s “Intellectual Trends in the Fifteenth Century,” *Ming Studies* 27 (1989): 1–16.
 28. *Huishi lu*, 1535: 4b–6b, 14b–16b.
 29. FPP, 205–206.
 30. *Huishi lu*, 11a–12a.
 31. *Ibid.*, 46a–48a.
 32. *Ibid.*, 49a.
 33. *Ibid.*, 45a–b.
 34. Xue Yingqi, *Fangshan xiansheng wenlu* [Recorded writings of Xue Yingqi] (Suzhou edition, 1553), 20.12a–15b.
 35. *Ibid.*, 20.16b–21a.
 36. See the *Shandong xiangshi lu* [Record of the Shandong provincial civil examination], 1489: 3/1460, 1478, for two policy questions evaluated according to the standards of “reliable learning”; and *Huguang xiangshi lu* [Record of the Huguang provincial civil examination], 1489: 3/1628. Both are in the MDDKLHB.
 37. The *Ming Wanli zhi Chongzhen jian xiangshi lu huishi lu huiji* (late Ming edition) contains examinations from 1595 to 1628.
 38. FPP, 100–101.
 39. HMCH, 1.48–53a: policy question and answer on paleography in the 1561 Yingtian provincial examination.
 40. FPP, 251–259.
 41. CPK, xxv–xxx, 188–203.
 42. SCC, vol. 3, 192.
 43. See Joseph Needham, “China and the Origins of Qualifying Examinations in Medicine,” in *Clerks and Craftsmen in China and the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 379–395; Robert Hartwell, “Financial Expertise, Examinations, and the Formulation of Economic Policy in Northern Song China,” *JAS* 30, no. 2 (1971): 281–314; and Brian McKnight, “Mandarins as Legal Experts: Professional Learning in Song China,” in *NCE*, 493–516.

44. Zhang Hongsheng, “Qingdai yikuan kaoshi ji tili” [Qing dynasty examinations for medical officials with examples], *Zhonghua yishi zazhi* 25, no. 2 (April 1995): 95–96.
45. Robert Hymes, “Not Quite Gentlemen? Doctors in Sung and Yuan,” *Chinese Science* 7 (1986): 11–85; Jonathan Spence, *To Change China: Western Advisers in China, 1620–1960* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1980); and Joseph Levenson, “The Amateur Ideal in Ming and Early Qing Society: Evidence from Painting,” in *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, ed. John Fairbank (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 320–341. Cf. FPP, 102–137.
46. Zhu Zhenheng (1282–1358), *Gezhi yulun* [Added views on extending medical knowledge], in the SKQS, vol. 746, 637. See Angela Leung, “Transmission of Medical Knowledge from the Song to the Ming,” in *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History*, ed. Paul Smith and Richard von Glahn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 374–398.
47. See Pan Jixing, “The Spread of Georgius Agricola’s *De Re Metallica* in Late Ming China,” *T’oung Pao* 57 (1991): 108–118; and James Reardon-Anderson, *The Study of Change: Chemistry in China, 1840–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 30–36, 82–88.
48. Lucille Chia, “*Mashaben*: Commercial Publishing in Jianyang, Song-Ming,” in *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History*, 284–328.
49. HMSYK, 2.3b; and ZYC (1733), “Zongkao” [General overview], 15a.
50. Yuan-ling Chao, *Medicine and Society in Late Imperial China: A Study of Physicians in Suzhou, 1600–1850* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009); and Ping-yi Chu, “Technical Knowledge, Cultural Practices and Social Boundaries: Wan-nan Scholars and the Recasting of Jesuit Astronomy, 1600–1800” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1994).
51. Thatcher E. Deane, “The Chinese Imperial Astronomical Bureau: Form and Function of the Ming Dynasty ‘Qintianjian’ from 1365 to 1627” (PhD diss., University of Washington, 1989), 400–402.
52. HMCH, 1.19a, 4.32a.
53. Nathan Sivin, *Granting the Seasons: The Chinese Astronomical Reform of 1280, with a Study of Its Many Dimensions and a Translation of Its Records* (New York: Springer, 2009), 131–225.
54. HMCH, 1.19b–23a. See Nathan Sivin, “Cosmos and Computation in Early Chinese Mathematical Astronomy,” *T’oung Pao* 55 (1969): 1–73, esp. 12, 19.
55. HMCH, 1.19a.
56. Sivin, “Cosmos and Computation,” 63.
57. *Yuanshi* [History of the Yuan dynasty], 7 vols. (Taipei: Dingwen Press 1982), 52.1130–1131.
58. HMCH, 1.21a–22a.
59. Ibid.
60. Nathan Sivin, “Science and Medicine in Chinese History,” in *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization*, ed. Paul S. Ropp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 164–196, esp. 175.
61. HMCH, 1.23a.

62. Ibid., 1.22b–23a.
63. MS, 31.520 (167); and Deane, “The Chinese Imperial Astronomical Bureau,” 425–427.
64. MS, 31.527–528 (169); Willard Peterson, “Calendar Reform Prior to the Arrival of Missionaries at the Ming Court,” *Ming Studies* 21 (Spring 1986): 54–55; and Deane, “The Chinese Imperial Astronomical Bureau,” 421–433.
65. QBLC, 21.65.
66. Shen Xinzhou, “Xu” [Preface], in *Dixue* (Shanghai: Saoye shanfang lithograph, 1910).
67. Jonathan Spence, *Emperor of China: Self-Portrait of K'ang-hsi* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), xvii–xix, 15–16, 74–75. See Chu Pingyi, “Scientific Dispute in the Imperial Court: The 1664 Calendar Case,” *Chinese Science* 14 (1997); and Huang Yinong, “Qingchu tianzhujiao yu huijiao tianwen jia de zhengdou” [The struggle between Catholic and Muslim astronomers in the early Qing], *Jiuzhou xuekan* 5, no. 3 (1993): 47–69.
68. *Huangchao zhengdian leizuan* [Classified materials on Qing dynasty government regulations], comp. Xi Yufu (Taipei: Shenwu Press, 1969), 191.7b–8a.
69. Shen, “Xu.” See Benjamin Elman, *On Their Own Terms: Science in China, 1550–1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 223–280.
70. HMCH, 13.17a, 7.54a–59a.
71. Ibid., 12.13a–18b, 13.83a–90a.
72. *Shuntian xiangshi lu* [Record of the Shuntian provincial examination], 1831: 4a–5a, 64a–66b; and *Huishi lu*, 1685: 13a–15a, 74b–77a.
73. See *Huishi lu*, 1685: 11a–13a.
74. Gu Yanwu, “Sanchang” [The three examination sessions], in RZLJS, 16.385–386; and “Shixue” [Historical studies], in RZLJS, 16.391–392. See Inoue Susumu, “Rikyō mina shi setsu no keifu” [The genealogy of the thesis that the “Six Classics are all Histories”], in *Mimmatsu Shinsho no shakai to bunka* [Late-Ming early-Qing society and culture], ed. Ono Kazuko (Kyoto: Mingwen Press, 1996), 535–585.
75. Lu Wenchao, *Baojing tang wenji* [Collected essays from the Hall for Cherishing the Classics] (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1937), 4:327.
76. Qian Daxin, “Xu” [Preface], in *Nianershi kaoyi* [Examination of variances in the Twenty-two Dynastic Histories] (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1935–37), 1.
77. Du Weiyun, *Qing Qianjia shidai zhi shixue yu shijia* [Historians and historical studies in the Qing Qianlong and Jiaqing eras] (Taipei: Wenshi congkan, 1962), 13–48, 99–121.
78. FPP, 28–38. See also Pingyi Chu, “Ch’eng-Chu Orthodoxy, Evidential Studies and Correlative Cosmology: Chiang Yung and Western Astronomy,” *Philosophy and the History of Science: A Taiwanese Journal* 4, no. 2 (October 1995): 71–108.
79. FPP, 40–70.
80. *Huishi lu*, 1793: 46a–50a. Qing “New Text” scholars relied on sources composed in Western Han clerical script to challenge this “Old Text” claim, which was based on the alleged Han discovery of a *Zuo Commentary* written in more ancient “tadpole” script. See CPK, chapters 5–8. Bernhard Karlgren, *On the Authenticity and Nature*

of the *Tso Chuan* (Göteborgs, Sweden: Elanders Boktryckeri Aktiebolag, 1926), 3–65, rejects such claims.

81. HCXWXTK, 84.8429. Along with the *Zuo Commentary*, there remained two other Han commentaries: the *Guliang* and *Gongyang*.
82. HCXWXTK, 84.8429–8430. See Xu Liwang, “Bu Qingdai jinwen jingxue fuxing yuanyu Shangshu fang ‘jiangyi’” [Critique of the view that Qing dynasty New Text classical studies revived due to the lectures in the Upper Study of the emperor], *Fudan xuebao* 5 (2010): 132–140.
83. Chad D. Hansen, “Ancient Chinese Theories of Language,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 2 (1975): 245–280.
84. Li Tiaoyuan, “Xu” [Preface], in ZYKSJ, 1a–2a.

8. Curricular Reform

1. QSG, 11/3101, 3147.
2. DML, 1.18b–19a, 2.3a, 2.3b–4b.
3. Iona Man-cheong, *The Class of 1761: Examinations, State, and Elites in Eighteenth-Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), gives twenty-five grace examinations during the Qing, with 5,555 palace degrees granted, or 21 percent of the total number of Qing palace graduates.
4. See QBLC, 20.52–53.
5. *Shuntian fu xiangshi lu* [Record of the Shuntian provincial civil examination], 1657: 9b–11b, 62a–67b.
6. Huang Chunyao, *Taoyan chi* [Collection of Huang Chunyao] (Jiading edition, 1676), 2.40b–42a; and Lu Shiyi, *Sibian lu jiyao* [Collection of essentials in the record of thoughts for clarification] (Jiangsu: Jiangsu Bookstore, 1877), 5.7a.
7. *Luzi yishu* [Bequeathed writings of Master Lu], vol. 18 (Yanghu edition, ca. 1900), 1.1a–2b.
8. *Ibid.*, vol. 18, 1.3a–5b and 5.8a.
9. Diao Bao, “Fei bagu xing sizi wujing shuo” [Get rid of 8-legged essays and promote the Four Books and Five Classics], in QDQQJYLZX, 1/14–16.
10. Mei Wending, “Wang xiansheng bashi shou xu” [Preface to the eightieth anniversary of Mr. Wang], in QDQQJYLZX, 2/73–74, 2/172–174, and 2/183–185. See also HCJSWB, 7.1a–13a.
11. RZLJS, 376–418.
12. *Ibid.*, 383–384, 385–386, 406–407.
13. HCJSWB, 7.1a–1b, 8a–8b. Cf. Wolfgang Franke, *The Reform and Abolition of the Traditional Chinese Examination System* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard East Asian Monograph, 1960), 20–22; and Wm. Theodore de Bary, “Chinese Despotism and the Confucian Ideal: A Seventeenth-Century View,” in *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).
14. Shao Changheng, “Ni Jiangxi shice yi shiwen” [Drafting the first policy question on contemporary-style essays for Jiangxi], in QDQQJYLZX, 2/144–146.
15. HCJSWB, 7.4b–6a. See also ECCP, 847–848.

16. Lynn Struve, “Ruling from Sedan Chair: Wei Yijie (1616–1686) and the Examination Reform of the ‘Oboi’ Regency,” *Late Imperial China* 25, no. 2 (December 2004): 2–3, 10, 16.
17. The 1664 and 1667 anonymous vermilion papers (*zhujuan*) are housed in the Ming-Qing Archives, Academia Sinica, Taiwan. Copies are available in the East Asian Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
18. CT, 36.
19. Li Yindu (1631–1692), “Yongren” [Employing people], in QDQQJYLZX, 2/57–58.
20. QSG, 12/3149. See also DML, 1.10a–b.
21. QDQQJYLZX, 2/81–83, 85–86, 2/279–280. Cf. ECCP, 283–285.
22. See DML, 1.10a–10b.
23. Ch’ien Mu, *Traditional Government in Imperial China: A Critical Analysis*, trans. Chün-tu Hsueh and George Totten (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1982), 134–137.
24. QDQQJYLZX, 2/11–13, 2/25–27, 2/193–196, 2/213–240.
25. See the Kangxi emperor’s “Xiangju lixuan jie” [Explication for selecting local talent], in QDQQJYLZX, 2/244–245.
26. QSG, 12/3149–3150. See Norman Kutcher, *Mourning in Late Imperial China: Filial Piety and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Benjamin A. Elman, “Qing Learning and *Kōshōgaku* in Tokugawa Japan,” in *Sagacious Monks and Bloodthirsty Warriors: Chinese Views of Japan in the Ming-Qing Period*, ed. Joshua Fogel (Norwalk, CT: EastBridge Press, 2002), 158–182.
27. QBLC, 21.11.
28. QDMKTL, 2.7b–10b.
29. CT, 25; and Yang Xuewei et al., compilers, *Zhongguo kaoshi zhidu shi ziliao xuanbian* [Selected sources on the history of the Chinese civil service examination system] (Hefei, Anhui: Huangshan shushe, 1992), 351.
30. Zhang Zhongru, *Qingdai kaoshi zhidu* [Qing civil examination system] (Shanghai: Liming Bookstore, 1931), 38–41.
31. See Huo Bei’s 1738 memorial in *Huang-Qing mingchen zouyi* [Memorials of famous officials during the August Qing] (ca. 1796–1820 edition), 35.20a–22a.
32. HCJSWB, 7.13a–14a; Huang Guangliang, *Qingdai keju zhidu zhi yanjiu* [Research on the Qing dynasty civil examination system] (Taipei: Jiixin Cement Co. Cultural Foundation, 1976), 308–309; and ECCP, 601–603, 559–551.
33. RZLJS, 386–387.
34. DML, 13.7a–7b; ZYCH, 1.4a–b; and HCJSWB, 7.13a–14a.
35. *Huishi lu* [Record of the metropolitan civil examination], 1742: “Xu” [Preface], 1a–4a.
36. DML, 13.7b–10b; ZYCH, 1.4b–5b; and HCJSWB, 7.14a.
37. *Jiangnan xiangshi lu* [Record of the Jiangnan provincial civil examination], 1744: 22a–23b.
38. James J. Y. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 114, 128.
39. *Jiangnan xiangshi lu*, 1744: 74a–76a.

40. ZYC (1733 edition), vol. 8, 503a–b.
41. *Ibid.*, 504a–509a.
42. *Ibid.*, 509a–513a, esp. 511a–512a.
43. HCJSWB, 7.14a.
44. *Guochao Zhang Tingyu xiansheng nianpu* [Chronological biography of the Qing dynasty's Zhang Tingyu], in *Lidai nianpu dacheng* [Compendium of chronological biographies over the ages], comp. Liu Shipai (late Qing manuscript), unpaginated. Zhang's rejoinder to Shuhede's proposals are in QDQQJYLZX, 2/315–317. See also QBLC, 21.11.
45. Qianlong-era memorials in 1738 and 1750 favoring examination reform are collected in HQMCZY, 35.20a–22a, 46.5a–11a, 46.1a–4a.
46. The Qianlong emperor's 1736–1788 edicts are in QDQQJYLZX, 3/2–17. See QBLC, 21.41, on the rise of Han Learning and examinations.
47. The Qianlong emperor's edict ordering Fang Bao's collection is in QDQQJYLZX, 3/2–3. See ECCP, 236.
48. QDDQHDSL, 383.19a.
49. DML, 14.1a.
50. QDDQHDSL, 383.23a.
51. QDMKTL, 2.7b–13b and 2.21b–25a; and *Wenwei xiangshi li'an* [Case examples of essays from the provincial examinations] (1832 edition), 4a–5a, 20a–22b.
52. ZYC, 569a–576b.
53. ZYC, 589b–590a.
54. LBTB, 1758, 4th month, 26th day.
55. *Ibid.*
56. *Zhejiang xiangshi lu* [Record of the Zhejiang provincial civil examination], 1759: 7a–8a.
57. Zhu Yizun (1629–1709) in HCJSWB, 7.10a. Cf. FPP, 82–84.
58. DML, 14.12a.
59. *Jinke quanti xince fachen* [Models of complete answers for new policy questions in recent provincial civil examinations], comp. and annotated by Liu Tanzhi (1764 edition).
60. QDDQHDSL, 382.6b.
61. Elman, “The Transformation of the Civil Service Curriculum between 1250 and 1400 and the Role of the Yuan Dynasty in Classical Studies,” in the *Conference Volume on Yuan Dynasty Classical Studies*, organized by Lin Qingzhang et al. (Taipei: Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica, Taiwan, 2000), 23–69.
62. Zhang Xuecheng, *Zhangshi yishu* [Bequeathed works of Mr. Zhang Xuecheng] (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1936), 29.54a.
63. Kondo Mitsuo, *Shin shisen* [Selections of Qing poetry] (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1967), 9–35; and Wang Zhenyuan, *Qingshi xuan* [Selections of Qing poetry] (Taipei: Luojun wenhua Co., 1991). Cf. Pauline Yu, “Canon Formation in Late Imperial China,” in *Culture and State in Chinese History: Conventions, Accommodations, and Critiques*, ed. Theodore Huters et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 83–104.

64. DML, 14.11b–12b. See also James J. Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 26–29.
65. Guo Shaoyu, *Qing shihua* [Qing works on poetry discussions] (Shanghai: Guji Press, 1963); and Guo's preface to his *Qing shihua xubian* [Qing works on poetry discussions, continuation] (Shanghai: Guji Press, 1983), 1.
66. Elman, "From Value to Fact: The Emergence of Phonology as a Precise Discipline in Late Imperial China," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 102, no. 3 (July–October 1982): 493–500.
67. LBTB, 1765, 9th month, 5th day, for the memorial in this Sichuan case. Cf. CHCELIC, chapter 5.
68. DML, 16.10a–12a.
69. *Guangdong xiangshi lu* [Record of the Guangdong provincial civil examination], 1794: 9a–10b, 36a–39b.
70. Qian Daxin, *Shijia zhai yangxin lu* [Record of self-renewal from the Ten Yokes Study] (Taibei: Guangwen Bookstore, reprint of 1804 edition), 18.15b–16a.
71. Sun Xingyan, "Ni kechang shishi qing jian yong zhushu zhe" [Memorial recommending the use of scholia in examination compounds testing literati], in QDQQJYLZX, 3/278–279.
72. Seunghyun Han, "The Punishment of Examination Riots in the Early to Mid-Qing Period," *Late Imperial China* 32, no. 2 (December 2011): 133–165.
73. Chen Yuanhui, comp., *Zhongguo jindai jiaoyu shi ziliao huibian: Yapian zhanzheng shiqi jiaoyu* [Compendium of sources on the history of Chinese modern education: Opium War education] (Shanghai: Education Press, 1990), 57–76 and 414–434. See CPK, 298–306.
74. Elisabeth Kaske, "Fund-Raising Wars: Office Selling and Interprovincial Finance in Nineteenth-Century China," *HJAS* 71, no. 1 (2011): 69–141.
75. Ori Sela, "Qian Daxin (1728–1804): Knowledge, Identity, and Reception History in China, 1750–1930" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2011), 223–227.
76. ZYCH, 22.1a–18a.
77. QBLC, 1.1–178.
78. Chen Shouqi, *Zuohai wenji* [Collected essays of Chen Shouqi] (Qing edition ca. 1796–1849), 3.22a–25a, 1.25a–28b.
79. CPK, 275–306, stresses the impact of the Heshen (1746–1799) era on statecraft discourse from the 1780s to the early 1800s. See also Daniel McMahon, "Dynastic Decline, Heshen, and the Ideology of the Xianyu Reforms," *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, n.s., 38, no. 2 (2008): 231–255; and Wensheng Wang, *White Lotus Rebels and South China Pirates: Social Crisis and State Retreat in the Qing Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013), chapter 5.
80. Chen, *Zhongguo jindai jiaoyu shi ziliao huibian*, 414–417; and ECCP, 610–611. See William Rowe, "Rewriting the Qing Constitution: Bao Shichen's 'On Wealth' (*Shuochu*)," *Young Pao* 98, nos. 1–3 (2012): 178–216. Rowe's discussion of Bao's contribution to a hypothetical Ming-Qing "constitution" oversimplifies the diversity of statecraft discourses articulated from the 1780s to 1820s. See Wang, *White Lotus Rebels*, chapter 5; and Xu Liwang, "Bu Qingdai jinwen jingxue fuxing yuanyu

- Shangshu fang ‘jiangyi’” [Critique of the view that Qing dynasty New Text classical studies revived due to the lectures in the Upper Study of the emperor], *Fudan xuebao* 5 (2010): 132–140.
81. Chen, *Zhongguo jindai jiaoyu shi ziliao huibian*, 417–430. See Elman, “Qianlong wanqi Heshen, Zhuang Cunyu guanxi de chongxin kaocha” [Reexamination of the relationship between Heshen and Zhuang Cunyu in the late Qianlong period], *Fudan xuebao* 3 (2009): 59–63, 140.
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The term was coined to describe the transition in the United States from the rule of landowners and aristocratic heirs to the professional classes. A “meritocracy” in this sense is not a system in which every individual can elevate himself or herself on the basis of a merit system. The Chinese civil service was not a completely open merit system either. Cf. Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959).

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